JANUARY TRANSFER WINDOW ROUND-UP

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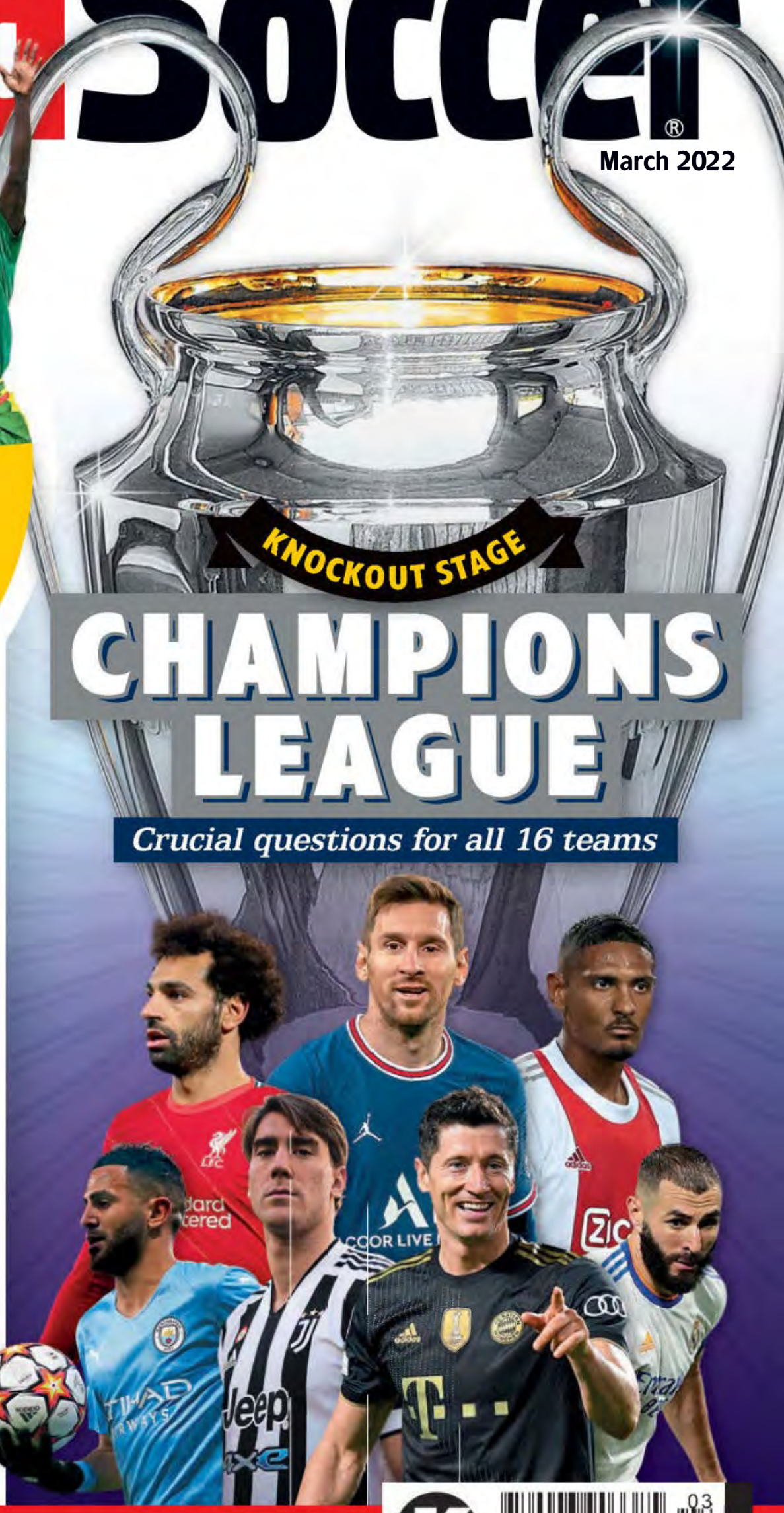
How Senegal won the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations



KNOCKOUT STAGE

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Crucial questions for all 16 teams

INTERVIEWS

LETCHKOV & UGBO

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Cameroon...Mohamed Salah celebrates with Trezeguet after Egypt's winning goal against Morocco in the AFCON quarter-finals

Cameroon...Comoros' Youssouf M'Changama celebrates scoring against Cameroon with emergency goalkeeper Chaker Alhadhur

Canada...Cyle Larin celebrates against the USA as Canada defeated their neighbours in a World Cup qualifier for the first time since 1980

Cameroon...Senegal supporters get behind their team at AFCON 2021

Ecuador...Brazil goalkeeper Alisson takes a swipe near Enner Valencia's head in an attempt to clear the ball during a World Cup qualifier

Iran...Iran players celebrate after becoming the first Asian team to achieve qualification for the 2022 World Cup

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FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR

The 2021 Africa Cup of Nations really did have everything.

There was the drama of tournament debutants Gambia and Comoros progressing to the knockout rounds, while pre-tournament favourites Algeria finished rock bottom of their group; there were farcical scenes, from a referee blowing for full-time five minutes early to Comoros fielding an outfielder in goal; and tragedy, with the Olembe Stadium disaster that claimed the lives of at least eight people.

At different times it was entertaining, despairing and heart breaking, but always it was eventful. Mark Gleeson and Jonathan Wilson were both in Cameroon, and attempt to unpack everything that happened in this issue.

> At times it was entertaining and at others it was heart breaking, but always it was eventful

Elsewhere, the knockout stages of the Champions League, Europa League and inaugural Europa Conference League have rolled into view. As well as looking at the teams and players that could be decisive in the final rounds of the competitions, we've also taken a closer look at a manager making a name for himself as one of the continent's brightest coaching talents: Sporting's Ruben Amorim.

Finally, we pay tribute to one of the most iconic names in the history of European football: Paco Gento, the only player to have won the European Cup on six occasions.

Jamie Evans, Assistant Editor

Tragic...a fallen barrier at the scene of the tragedy

CAMEROON

CAF facing tough questions over Olembe Stadium disaster

Confederation of African Football president Patrice Motsepe said that "we have a duty to find out exactly what happened" after eight people were killed and dozens more injured outside the Olembe Stadium in Yaounde during the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations.

A report by *The Guardian* found that, ahead of the hosts' 2-1 victory over Comoros in the last 16, thousands of fans attempted to access the ground via one gate to the south, causing overcrowding and eventually a surge.

According to the report, the deaths were caused by people falling and being trampled by the crowd. The victims included at least two children.

Motsepe suggested that the problems were caused in part by fans without tickets arriving "just to be part of the atmosphere," and also acknowledged that a gate "was closed for inexplicable reasons".

Initially the ground, which was built at a reported cost of £222 million, was suspended from hosting any more matches at AFCON 2021, although it did go on to host both the semi-final between Cameroon and Egypt, and the final.

"When people lose their lives, we all should be angry," added Motsepe. "We have to demand explanations and guarantees that it will never happen again."

"This was a sickening collision…yet again, the desire to win is seen as being worth serious risks to players' health…football simply must take action to enforce and strengthen its protocols"

Luke Griggs, deputy chief executive of brain injury charity Headway, criticises the handling of Sadio Mane's head injury at AFCON

FIFA

International loan rules overhauled

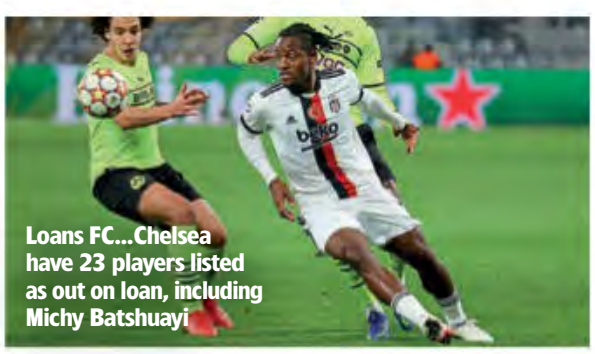
Clubs will be limited in how many players they can send out on loan under new FIFA rules designed to prevent clubs from hoarding players.

From July, international loans between clubs will be capped at eight, going down to seven in 2023-24 and six the year after, with FIFA giving domestic associations three years to implement their own systems that fall "in line" with the new international rules.

The notion of so-called "feeder clubs", such as Chelsea's previous relationship with Dutch side Vitesse, may also come to an end, with clubs limited to a maximum of three loans to a single club at one time.

In addition, a written agreement defining the terms of the deal must be submitted to FIFA, outlining the financial conditions of the loan, as well as the duration. It must be from at least one transfer window to the next, up to a maximum of one year. Players aged 21 and under will not be counted as an international loan.

The rules, initially to be introduced in July 2020 as part of a wider review of the global transfer market, were delayed by the pandemic.



Loans FC…Chelsea have 23 players listed as out on loan, including Michy Batshuayi

HEROES & VILLAINS

SALIMA MUKANSANGA

The Rwandan referee made history at the AFCON finals by becoming the first woman to take charge of a match in the competition. After overseeing Zimbabwe's 2-1 group-stage win over Guinea, Mukansanga told *Sky Sports News*: "I'm really proud of myself. I'm really happy because it is a big achievement and honour. It's a privilege… once I got that chance and I got that opportunity I thought: 'Let me show them, let me open the door for the rest of the women'."

History maker…ref Salima Mukansanga

JAMES RODRIGUEZ

When Ousmane Coulibaly collapsed during a Qatar Stars League match in January, the quick thinking of opponent James Rodriguez helped save his life. After the former Mali international suffered a heart attack, Colombian midfielder James adjusted his head to make sure that he could breathe properly, while Coulibaly's Al Wakrah team-mates ushered on the medical team. "Thanks to God and the work of these heroes I was saved," the 32-year-old defender said after recovering in hospital.

ADAMA TRAORE

Before leaving Wolverhampton Wanderers to return to his first club Barcelona on loan, Traore became the latest player to commit one per cent of his salary to Common Goal, the organisation set up by Juan Mata for footballers to donate to various causes. Traore's donation is specifically for the anti-racism project, which aims to end racism in football by "providing anti-racism training across the professional and grassroots football industry."

DEVIN PLANK

The Excelsior youngster was welcomed back onto a football pitch with a guard of honour after playing his first game since being diagnosed with cancer last year. The 20-year-old, who is still receiving chemotherapy, made his comeback in his side's Dutch Cup defeat to Ajax, coming on in the 89th minute, with all 22 players lining up to applaud his return.

RAITH ROVERS

The Scottish Championship club were forced to make a U-turn on its decision to sign David Goodwillie after coming under fire both from their fans and the media. An official statement from chairman John Sim read: "I firstly want to apologise wholeheartedly to our fans, sponsors, players and the wider Raith Rovers community for the anguish and anger caused over the past few days. We got it wrong…we focused far too much on football matters and not enough on what this decision would mean for our club and the community as a whole."

GIANNI INFANTINO

The FIFA president's attempts to convince people to get behind his unpopular vision for a biennial World Cup took a particularly tasteless turn when he claimed the plans could help prevent African migrants from "death in the sea." He said: "We need to give hope to Africans so they don't need to cross the Mediterranean in order to find, maybe, a better life but, more probably, death in the sea." He later claimed his remarks had been misinterpreted.

FC FLORESTI

The Moldovan top-flight club have been found guilty of match-fixing and will be relegated at the end of the season. An investigation by the Moldovan Football Federation ethics committee found irregularities relating to several matches between February and July 2021. The club have the right to appeal the sanction.

CAF

As if CAF wasn't harsh enough on Comoros by forcing them to field left-back Chaker Alhadhur in goal for their AFCON knockout clash with Cameroon – despite one of their goalkeepers testing negative for COVID – they also handed them a $5,000 fine for "failure to respect the jersey numbers". The Comoros were also fined a further $12,000 for non-compliance with COVID protocols and for causing a delay during their 2-1 defeat.

Fined…Alhadhur had taped his squad number to the GK jersey

"Am I playing a desperate card? No...over the next few days we'll try different things and evaluate players that have not been called up for a while, like Mario, and others that are new"

Italy coach Roberto Mancini defends his decision to recall Mario Balotelli

Mario BALOTELLI

(Adana Demirspor)

An inspired reunion or an act of desperation? That was the debate in Italy at the end of January, as Mario Balotelli returned to the *Azzurri* set-up for a training camp ahead of March's crucial World Cup play-offs.

It is the latest chapter in the striker's tempestuous relationship with manager Roberto Mancini, who has acted as a father figure on some occasions and a despairing disciplinarian at others.

Yet with Ciro Immobile, Moise Kean and Andrea Belotti scoring just five goals between them in Italy's bid to reach Qatar, the manager is ready to take another gamble on Balotelli.

His place in Mancini's squad for March isn't necessarily assured yet, but with eight goals in his first 19 Turkish League games for new club Adana Demirspor, Balotelli has earned one more shot at being an *Azzurri* hero.

Marko LAZETIC
(Milan)
A giant of a striker at 6ft 4ins tall, the 18-year-old target man was snapped up in January after a breakthrough season at hometown club Red Star Belgrade.

ENDRICK Felipe
(Palmeiras)
The 15-year-old wonderkid is being described as Brazil's next big thing after scoring over 100 goals in youth football, including six at a recent Under-20 tournament. A number of European clubs are queuing up to sign him.

Justin CHE
(Hoffenheim)
A USA Under-20 international, the 18-year-old right-back has followed Ricardo Pepi from FC Dallas to Germany for the rest of the season on loan.

Hatem BEN ARFA
(Lille)
Jocelyn Gourvennec is the latest coach to attempt to coax some consistency out of the undoubtedly talented yet troubled winger, who will turn 35 in March.

Paul WANNER
(Bayern Munich)
Bayern's endless conveyor belt of top talent continues. In January 16-year-old Wanner became their youngest-ever Bundesliga player (and second youngest in the league's history), before signing a long-term contract with the club.

Kaide GORDON
(Liverpool)
In January the teenager became Liverpool's youngest-ever scorer in the FA Cup against Shrewsbury, then made his Premier League debut a week later.

"If I were Haaland and I wanted to win the Ballon d'Or, I wouldn't go to the same team as Mbappe"

Barcelona defender Gerard Pique dishes out some transfer advice for Borussia Dortmund's in-demand striker

MOST EXPENSIVE DEALS IN **JANUARY TRANSFER WINDOW**

£62.5m	**Dusan VLAHOVIC**	*(Fiorentina to Juventus)*
£46.3m	**Ferran TORRES**	*(Manchester City to Barcelona)*
£33.3m	**Luis DIAZ**	*(Porto to Liverpool)*
£33.3m	**Bruno GUIMARAES**	*(Lyon to Newcastle United)*
£25m	**Chris WOOD**	*(Burnley to Newcastle United)*
£23m	**Lucas DIGNE**	*(Everton to Aston Villa)*
£17.6m	**Vitaliy MYKOLENKO**	*(Dynamo Kiev to Everton)*
£16.7m	**Yuri ALBERTO**	*(Internacional to Zenit St-Petersburg)*
£15.9m	**Rodrigo BENTANCUR**	*(Juventus to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£15m	**Julian ALVAREZ**	*(River Plate to Manchester City)***
£14.8m	**Ricardo PEPI**	*(FC Dallas to Augsburg)*
£14m	**HWANG Hee-chan**	*(RB Leipzig to Wolverhampton Wanderers)**
£13m	**Jonathan IKONE**	*(Lille to Fiorentina)*
£12.5m	**Romain FAIVRE**	*(Brest to Lyon)*
£12.5m	**Dan BURN**	*(Brighton to Newcastle United)*
£12m	**Kieran TRIPPIER**	*(Atletico Madrid to Newcastle United)*
£12m	**Wout WEGHORST**	*(Wolfsburg to Burnley)*
£12m	**Nathan PATTERSON**	*(Rangers to Everton)*
£11.6m	**Arthur CABRAL**	*(Basel to Fiorentina)*
£10m	**David NERES**	*(Ajax to Shakhtar Donetsk)*
£10m	**Jonas WIND**	*(Copenhagen to Wolfsburg)*
£10m	**Jean-Philippe MATETA**	*(Mainz to Crystal Palace)**
£9.3m	**VANDERSON**	*(Gremio to Monaco)*
£9m	**Jakub KAMINSKI**	*(Lech Poznan to Wolfsburg)***
£8.3m	**Jens CAJUSTE**	*(Midtjylland to Reims)*
£8m	**Kacper KOZLOWSKI**	*(Pogon Szczecin to Brighton)***
£7.5m	**Wenderson GALENO**	*(Braga to Porto)*
£7.04m	**Daryl DIKE**	*(Orlando City to West Bromwich Albion)*
£7m	**Federico GATTI**	*(Frosinone to Juventus)***
£6.7m	**Shamar NICHOLSON**	*(Charleroi to Spartak Moscow)*
£6.7m	**Marcus EDWARDS**	*(Vitoria Guimaraes to Sporting)*
£6m	**Deniz UNDAV**	*(Union Saint-Gilloise to Brighton)***
£6m	**Kelvin YEBOAH**	*(Sturm Graz to Genoa)*
£5.84m	**Tajon BUCHANAN**	*(New England Revolution to Club Brugge)*
£5.8m	**Edon ZHEGROVA**	*(Basel to Lille)*
£5.8m	**Andreas SKOV OLSEN**	*(Bologna to Club Brugge)*
£5.8m	**Billal BRAHIMI**	*(Angers to Nice)*
£5.8m	**Matias AREZO**	*(River Plate Montevideo to Granada)*
£5.2m	**Kevin PAREDES**	*(D.C. United to Wolfsburg)*
£5.1m	**Maduka OKOYE**	*(Sparta Rotterdam to Watford)***
£5m	**Joey VEERMAN**	*(Heerenveen to PSV)*
£5m	**EDERSON**	*(Corinthians to Salernitana)*
£5m	**Marvin FRIEDRICH**	*(Union Berlin to Borussia Monchengladbach)*
£4.2m	**Silvan HEFTI**	*(Young Boys to Genoa)*
£4.2m	**Denis ZAKARIA**	*(Borussia Monchengladbach to Juventus)*
£4.1m	**Sardar AZMOUN**	*(Zenit St-Petersburg to Bayer Leverkusen)*
£4m	**Edo KAYEMBE**	*(Eupen to Watford)*
£4m	**Patrick BERG**	*(Bodo/Glimt to Lens)*
£4m	**Hassane KAMARA**	*(Nice to Watford)*

** Loan move turned permanent*
*** Player will remain at current club on loan*

Dusan VLAHOVIC
Perhaps the most wanted player in Serie A at the start of January, Vlahovic had a long list of suitors both in Italy and abroad (namely Arsenal), so signing him is a huge boost for Juventus. The Serbian joined Juve with the team lying in fifth place, nine points behind Serie A leaders Inter, with their attackers – Alvaro Morata, Moise Kean, Federico Chiesa, Fernando Bernardeschi and Paolo Dybala – having scored 18 goals between them – just one more than Vlahovic managed by himself. His arrival could turn their season around.

David NERES
Regular readers of transfer gossip might be slightly surprised to see Neres moving to Ukraine rather than the Premier League, where he has frequently been linked. Injuries, plus competition from summer signing Steven Berghuis and fellow Brazilian Antony, restricted Neres to just three Eredivisie starts this season, but in Shakhtar Donetsk he has found the perfect home for aspirational Brazilians. Perform well for the Miners and he could follow the likes of Willian, Fernandinho, Fred and Douglas Costa in securing a move to one of Europe's big boys.

Arthur CABRAL
Fiorentina fans dismayed by Dusan Vlahovic's €75m departure to Juventus may be consoled by his replacement arriving for a comparative steal. Since arriving in Europe in 2019, initially on loan from Sao Paulo giants Palmeiras, the Brazilian striker has been a reliable goalscorer for Basel, but this season his form has really taken off. He scored 14 goals in 18 league games, and struck a further 13 times during the Swiss side's march to the last 16 of the Europa Conference League. Cabral may need this season to adjust to Serie A but, at the age of 23, time is on his side.

Marcus EDWARDS
The man once compared to Lionel Messi by his Tottenham manager, Mauricio Pochettino, has another shot at the big time after joining Portuguese champions Sporting from Vitoria Guimaraes. A nimble, left-footed winger, Edwards was part of England Under-19s' European Championship-winning side in 2017, but never quite made it in the Premier League's hustle and bustle. Portugal has proven a perfect home for him, claiming 17 goals and eight assists in two and a half seasons, and he will hope to play a part in Sporting's Champions League last-16 tie with Manchester City. The good news for Spurs is that they have reportedly pocketed around half of the transfer fee.

Denis ZAKARIA
Amidst all of Juve's midfield wheeling and dealing, Zakaria's arrival may prove to be the best bit of business. Under normal circumstances, the 25-year-old would be worth much more than £4.2 million, but with just six months remaining on his Gladbach contract, the Italians were able to pick up a bargain. They saw off competition from several reported Premier League suitors, including Manchester United and Arsenal, to land the Switzerland midfielder, who has been a consistent Bundesliga performer over the last five years.

Keir RADNEDGE
THE INSIDER

Football, cryptocurrency and NFTs

Supporters whose eyes wander away from the direct action on the pitch may have been mystified by the electronic advertisements for a sponsor by the name of eToro. Was this a Chinese washing-machine manufacturer? A Korean smartphone? Or maybe a brand-new arrival in the sportswear market?

None of the above. In fact the Israeli company is what used to be known as a stockbroker, a go-between trader in shares. The difference is that they trade in the new world of cryptocurrencies and their derivatives.

A rash of crypto traders have pounced on high-value football clubs in western Europe as a promotional shortcut to the millions of fans who may be enticed to throw "real" money into the financial outer space of "electronic money".

According to sports business specialist SportCal, more than half of the 20 Premier League clubs have signed up with crypto sponsors to the tune of more than £20 million. Across western Europe more than 100 such partnerships have been concluded with companies such as eToro, Crypto.com, Socios and Sorare. Watford and Southampton have crypto companies as shirt sponsors in deals with Stake.com and Sportsbet.io respectively.

Crypto companies... Southampton and Watford's shirt sponsors

The attraction is obvious. The COVID-19 pandemic hit sport in general, and professional football in particular, very hard. The top 20 clubs in Europe's rich list, compiled by accountants Deloitte, saw revenues in the last accounting year fall by a total of €8 billion, or 12 per cent.

Professional football has a history of over-spending on players' wages and transfers, and is therefore perpetually in search of the next revenue-raising gimmick.

Football's "for sale" signs are always out there. So along comes the next promising cash cow: the rapidly expanding crypto market with its vague promise of profits in non-tangible cash out beyond the controls – and protections – of the standard high street banking system.

> Football's "for sale" signs are always out there. So along comes the next promising cash cow: the rapidly expanding crypto market with its vague promise of profits

A growing number of clubs offer to pay players and staff in digital currencies while more will soon be accepting cryptocurrencies for tickets or merchandise in the club shop. These systems are powered by fan tokens, typically priced around £2 or the equivalent, which may entice supporters with opportunities to vote on minor policy issues. The genius of the concept is that this keeps fans both at home and abroad wound into ongoing support.

This revolution is not limited only to clubs. Both the Spanish and Mexican federations have signed off deals built around their national teams.

But not all the tales are happy or reassuring.

Manchester City's initial dabble in the market lasted just one week. In mid-November, City were: "excited to partner with 3Key Technologies in their journey to simplify the decentralised finance (DeFi) trading analysis user experience through the power of football to engage with our fans." The excitement did not last. Just days later City suspended the partnership, reportedly because of 3Key's lack of online presence.

This was far from the only case of a football market crypto

operator having no footprint, digital or otherwise. More negativity surrounding a Monaco-based crypto company called Iqoniq, which proved anything but iconic. Its liquidation upset a string of sports entities including Real Sociedad, Crystal Palace and Marseille as well as La Liga, EuroLeague Basketball, the European Handball Federation and the McLaren Formula One team.

No wonder supporters' organisations are wary. Malcolm Clarke, chair of the Football Supporters' Association, which represents fans in England and Wales, has cautioned about clubs "trying to squeeze extra money out of supporters by making up inconsequential 'engagement' online polls...not a good look."

Concerns are not limited only to fans. The UK's Advertising Standards Agency ticked off Arsenal in December that adverts for its fan tokens on the club website and on Facebook were "misleading". The ads did not explain the crypto trading risks, potential tax implications or absence of tokens market regulations.

An ASA spokesperson said: "Cryptoassets are a red-alert priority issue for us. [These adverts] were irresponsible because they took advantage of consumers' inexperience or credulity and trivialised investment in cryptoassets." Arsenal had told the ASA that fan tokens were designed to boost supporter participation and therefore were "materially different" to other cryptocurrencies used as a means of payment.

In mid-January the UK's financial regulator decided to restrict the advertising of crypto products to high net worth individuals.

The most successful club in this market are Paris Saint-Germain. Their fan token capitalisation was recently valued at $49m. This was fuelled significantly by the signing last summer of Lionel Messi. In fact tokens were even included in Messi's reported €30m signing-on fee.

PSG reported trading volumes of $1.2bn in the week before his signing. The club's Chief Partnerships Officer Marc Armstrong said: "We have been able to engage with a new global audience, creating a significant digital revenue stream."

Clearly.

Fan tokens are not the only manifestation of the crypto-tech explosion. Also erupting on the marketplace have been non-fungible tokens, generally known as NFTs. These are so-called "digital assets" such as any images including digital artworks and videos but also music, text and even Tweets.

Sharp buying and selling has created crypto-rich investors who have then invested further in NFTs. On an individual level it appears that social status is one of the attractions of NFTs. The value to football has yet to emerge through the mists of market excitement. Dealing may be fun for million-contract superstars and managers but way beyond the world of the average fan on the terrace.

This is a super-explosive step up from the old cigarette cards. Last August, returning to Messi, a licensed NFT collection called "Messiverse" was put up for auction. The reserve price was set at $50,000 but bidding soared to a staggering $1.12m. Other NFT card valuations recorded have included Manchester United forward Cristiano Ronaldo at $265,000 and Manchester City midfielder Kevin De Bruyne at $167,000.

On the other side of the bitcoin, so to speak, former Chelsea defender John Terry recently became subject to legal scrutiny from the Premier League after the trophy appeared in his NFT imagery. It was later removed.

Spending silly money to own NFTs appears pointless when the images can easily be downloaded for free. Investors, it seems, are essentially paying for the receipt that says they own the image, rather than the image itself.

Also, like cryptocurrencies, NFTs are unregulated and vulnerable to scams if not specific criminality.

England manager Gareth Southgate has sought legal advice after his name was used in an email scam to encourage people to buy cryptocurrencies. A spokesman for Southgate said: "The details about Mr Southgate in this story are completely untrue and his name has been used without permission."

With NFTs, as with fan tokens, as with boring old-fashioned stocks and shares: even eager supporters desperate to demonstrate loyalty to their favourite clubs and players should bear in mind the sage advice that investments can go down as well as up in value.

Remember what happened to the dot.com bubble?

John Terry...his NFTs have come under scrutiny

BOOKS THIS MONTH

EUROPE'S NEXT POWERHOUSE?
By Abdullah Abdullah (Pitch Publishing, £12.99)

Chelsea have enjoyed unprecedented success in England and Europe since Roman Abramovich arrived in 2003. The men's team has set a phenomenally high benchmark, which the Chelsea women's team now aims to follow. From dissecting the tactical concepts of the team to in-depth player analysis, *Chelsea FC Women: Europe's Next Powerhouse?* reveals the factors that have put the Blues on a path to be a force in England and Europe for years to come.

LOSING MY SPURS
By Anthony Potts (Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

Anthony Potts was part of the Tottenham side that won the 1990 FA Youth Cup and earned a place in the England youth team. Later, he was a member of Spurs' first Premier League squad alongside Paul Gascoigne and Gary Lineker – but he never got to play. In this tell-all book, Anthony shares a story that rarely gets told – the story of a failed footballer. He sacrificed everything in pursuit of his dream. Was it all worth it? You be the judge.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Poor pitches, dismal refs and negative football: the problems with AFCON 2021

The 2021 Africa Cup of Nations in Cameroon was not a riot of fun. Only 100 goals were scored in the 52 games of the tournament, an average of just 1.92 per match. Only four tournaments in Africa Cup of Nations history have averaged fewer goals, all of which were much smaller tournaments. While that certainly gives lie to the lazy stereotypes of naive African defending, it also raises an important question: why?

In part it's the pitches. The surface at the Japoma Stadium in Douala was dreadful, cutting up from the very start. It was directly responsible for Sierra Leone's bizarre, stoppage-time equaliser against Ivory Coast, as the goalkeeper Badra Ali Sangare, diving to try to prevent the ball going out for a corner, landed badly, his knee lodging in the turf causing the ball to be dislodged from his grasp.

By and large, though, a poor surface hinders passing and thus attacking. The last-16 tie between Ivory Coast and Egypt on that pitch was ruined, and the quarter-final and semi-final ended up being moved to the Stade Ahmadou Ahidjo in Yaounde. Even the pitch at Olembe, the main stadium, was slow, and attempts to slicken it by watering only made it heavier.

That undoubtedly helped Egypt, who were part of a wider and ongoing trend that seems to be getting worse. They set out it seemed, certainly in every knockout game, to spoil. Their time-wasting, through feigning injury, complaining to referees and dawdling over set-plays was outrageous. The ball was in play for just 40 minutes and 26 seconds of normal time in the final against Senegal, down between 20 and 25 per cent of what might be considered standard. This is anti-football in its purest form: literally playing as little football as possible.

Only Bakary Gassama among the referees was prepared to stand up to it, and the result was that, after he had taken charge of Nigeria's win over Egypt in the group stage, Egypt lodged an official protest against his appointment to their semi-final with the hosts Cameroon. Generally, though, the refereeing was dismal: players penalised for over-literal interpretations of the laws, but sustained cheating allowed to pass unchecked. In the final, the South African Victor Gomes was helpless, almost as though he had decided early on that he wasn't going to send somebody off. Unforgivably, he added just two minutes in the first half and three in the second.

So, on a very basic level, there aren't many goals because there isn't as much football played as in other tournaments. And what football that is played tends to be bitty and scrappy.

Then there is the approach taken by the coaches. This was evident in the World Cups and European Championships for a time, although thankfully it seems the very best European teams have moved on from the drudgery of France 2016. International coaches don't have their players together for very long.

> This is anti-football in its purest form: literally playing as little football as possible

Dreadful...the playing surface at Douala's Japoma Stadium

Anti-football... Egypt coach Carlos Queiroz is sent off

Necessarily what they do must be fairly basic. And so, it's hardly surprising if a lot of international coaches prefer to get the defence organised rather than trying to build the coherent patterns of attack that predominate at club level.

The result is that international defences operate at a higher level than attacks, that players such as Mohamed Salah or Riyad Mahrez, who usually operate in extremely sophisticated structures at club level, suddenly find themselves asked to improvise at the front of a side that does little to support them in the final third. That leads to slow and stodgy football, which is relatively easy to defend against. The situation was worsened by the lack of time many national sides had to prepare, with the Premier League not releasing players until after the January 2 fixtures, a week before the tournament began. That, perhaps, is a warning for the World Cup, the opening game of which comes just nine days after the final Premier League game before the winter break.

And then there is the issue of the players, a point made by Diomansy Kamara. Although there are plenty of gifted forwards – the likes of Sadio Mane, Salah and Mahrez – there is a major dearth of creators who play slightly deeper. It feels as though there are no heirs to the likes of Ahmed Hassan, Sunday Oliseh and Theophile Abega. Football, it's true, has changed, but the majority of midfields at this tournament (and most sides played a 4-3-3) were physically imposing and well-organised rather than offering much in the way of creativity.

That is a problem for African football. The Cup of Nations is already a tournament that feels as though it has to argue for its place in the global calendar. It shouldn't have to justify itself, but it would help if it were a spectacle more people wanted to watch. As it is, far too many games are grinding exercises in spoiling. The football is terrible, and there's not enough of it.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Wrapped up... USA left-back Antonee Robinson

1 A NEW LOW

At the start of February, USA took on Honduras in one of the coldest football matches on record. During the World Cup qualifier in Minnesota, temperatures plummeted to -16C, with many players wearing balaclavas during the match, and two of the visitors forced off at half-time. Honduras' Colombian coach Hernan Dario Gomez said ahead of the qualifier: "The game hasn't started but I can't wait for it to end, because it's not for enjoying, it's for suffering," although US coach Gregg Berhalter pointed out that they aren't the only team to play in difficult conditions. "When we go down to those countries and it's 90 degrees and it's unbearable humidity and guys are getting dehydrated and cramping up and getting heat exhaustion – that's the nature of our competition."

2 STAT OF THE YEAR

The award for perhaps the most mind-boggling stat of the season goes to journalist Richard Jolly, who pointed out on Twitter that: "Roy Hodgson is the sixth man to manage Watford since they kept a Premier League clean sheet." Fittingly, the Hornets ended that wait in their very first league match under the former England manager, drawing 0-0 with Burnley – their first shut-out since February 2020. That was a 3-0 win over Liverpool which came under Nigel Pearson, who has subsequently been replaced by Hayden Mullins (as caretaker), Vladimir Ivic, Xisco Munoz, Claudio Ranieri and now Hodgson.

3 FRANCK FORGOTTEN

Former France and Bayern Munich star Franck Ribery may not be one of the best wingers in Europe anymore, but he is still playing, aged 38, for Serie A side Salernitana. That fact apparently came as news to Robinson de Castro, chairman of Brazilian side Ceara. "They called me yesterday and offered me the chance to sign Ribery," he told *Globo Esporte*. "I didn't even know he was still playing!" Unsurprisingly, the Frenchman didn't move to Brazil, remaining with the struggling Italian side.

4 A TWEET TOO FAR

Girondins de Bordeaux found themselves looking for a new shirt sponsor after parting company with Winamax, following a series of tweets from the online betting firm mocking the club. The French side have spent the season struggling at the foot of Ligue 1 – a fact that Winamax have been all too ready to point out. Indeed, when the news of their split from Bordeaux was announced, they tweeted: "We've been looking for a good defence for one hour, but like the Girondins, we can't find it." Winamax previously sponsored Spanish side Granada, who were also left fuming after a similar tweet mocked the side's performance – suggesting that the betting firm's marketing strategy may differ from the clubs they ally themselves with.

5 DOUBLE DISALLOWED

Spare a thought for Andy Carroll who had not one but two world-class goals disallowed during Reading's Championship defeat to Fulham. First, the former England striker expertly converted a cross with an acrobatic bicycle kick, before later thumping in a left-footed volley from the edge of the penalty box after controlling the ball on his chest. Not that the goals would have affected the outcome of the match; the Royals lost 7-0 in what proved to be Carroll's penultimate game for the club before joining West Bromwich Albion.

Disallowed... Carroll's bicycle kick

"Sometimes it only takes one person from outside to destroy a beautiful love affair…what has happened and some things that were said about me in the last month have made me very sad"

Lucas Digne appears to take a parting shot at former Everton manager Rafa Benitez after joining Aston Villa

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

IN

Fresh start…Dele Alli at his signing presentation with new Everton manager Frank Lampard

EUROPE

DELE ALLI joined Everton from Tottenham Hotspur with the deal potentially rising to £40m depending on appearances. **CHRISTIAN ERIKSEN** returned to the Premier League with Brentford after leaving Internazionale due to his heart condition. Aston Villa paid a reported £2m to sign defender **CALUM CHAMBERS** from Arsenal and Wolverhampton Wanderers snapped up **CHIQUINHO** from Estoril for £2.9m.

Euro comeback…Nani

Barcelona signed **PIERRE-EMERICK AUBAMEYANG** on a free transfer from Arsenal and Celta Vigo signed **ORBELIN PINEDA** from Cruz Azul, while his fellow Mexico international **JESUS CORONA** joined Sevilla from Porto. Meanwhile, Atletico Madrid captured Mozambique left-back **REINILDO MANDAVA** from Lille and Danish midfielder **DANIEL WASS** from Valencia.

Wolfsburg re-signed former forward **MAX KRUSE** from Union Berlin, while Sporting also re-signed one of their former strikers, agreeing a move for Algerian **ISLAM SLIMANI** following his contract termination at Lyon.

Venezia announced the signing of former Portugal international **NANI** following his release by Orlando City, while North Macedonia legend **GORAN PANDEV** joined Parma from Genoa.

Marseille signed **SEAD KOLASINAC** from Arsenal and French defender **SAMUEL GIGOT** from Spartak Moscow before loaning the latter back to the Russian side for the rest of the season.

FOLARIN BALOGUN and **AARON CONNOLLY** joined Middlesbrough on loan from Arsenal and Brighton & Hove Albion respectively, while Liverpool sent **NECO WILLIAMS** and **NATHANIEL PHILLIPS** on loan spells at Fulham and Bournemouth respectively. The Cherries also completed loan deals for **TODD CANTWELL** (Norwich City), **FREDDIE WOODMAN** (Newcastle United) and **ETHAN LAIRD** (Manchester United). Former England striker **JERMAIN DEFOE** returned to League One Sunderland after leaving Rangers.

FRANK LAMPARD replaced Rafa Benitez as Everton manager, while **ROY HODGSON** became Watford's third manager of the season, replacing Claudio Ranieri.

In the Football League, **SHOTA ARVELADZE** replaced Grant McCann as Hull City manager, **NEIL HARRIS** took charge of Gillingham after the departure of Steve Evans, and **STEVE BRUCE** replaced Valerien Ismael at West Bromwich Albion. Elsewhere, **JOHN SHERIDAN** took permanent charge of Oldham Athletic for the fourth time.

ALEXANDER BLESSIN was appointed Genoa coach, replacing Andriy Shevchenko who was fired after just 11 games. In Spain, Cadiz hired **SERGIO** to replace Alvaro Cervera.

Greek side Atromitos appointed former Wales boss **CHRIS COLEMAN** as manager, while Olympiakos signed 20-year-old French midfielder **ABDOULAYE DABO** from Nantes.

Free agents **BAFETIMBI GOMIS** and **WILFRIED BONY** joined Galatasaray and NEC Nijmegen respectively, while **JORDON IBE** moved to Adanaspor.

CONCACAF

Orlando City signed promising Uruguayan forward **FACUNDO TORRES** from Penarol, and Austin FC captured **JHOJAN VALENCIA** from Deportivo Cali, while Inter Miami signed Jamaica international **DAMION LOWE** from Al Ittihad and United States right-back **DEANDRE YEDLIN** from Galatasaray.

Mexico defender **CARLOS SALCEDO** completed his move from Tigres to Toronto FC, with Venezuela forward **YEFERSON SOTELDO** going in the opposite direction. Elsewhere in Mexico, Club America signed **DIEGO VALDES** from Santos Laguna and sold winger **SEBASTIAN CORDOVA** to Tigres, who also bought **JESUS ANGULO** from Atlas.

SOUTH AMERICA

PAULINHO returned to Corinthians after leaving Saudi Arabian side Al Ahli in September. Elsewhere, **RICARDO GOULART** moved to Santos from Guangzhou, Aston Villa forward **WESLEY** joined Internacional on loan, **THIAGO MAIA** completed his permanent move to Flamengo from Lille after an 18-month loan spell, and Red Bull Bragantino signed Brazilian full-back **JUAN CANDIDO** from sister club RB Leipzig.

JANUARY 2022 MAJOR LOAN MOVES

Nadiem Amiri *(Bayer Leverkusen to Genoa)*
Jeremie Boga *(Sassuolo to Atalanta)*
Brian Brobbey *(RB Leipzig to Ajax)*
Jovane Cabral *(Sporting to Lazio)*
Felipe Caicedo *(Genoa to Internazionale)*
Philippe Coutinho *(Barcelona to Aston Villa)*
Amad Diallo *(Manchester United to Rangers)*
Anwar El Ghazi *(Aston Villa to Everton)*
Bryan Gil *(Tottenham Hotspur to Valencia)*
Robin Gosens *(Atalanta to Internazionale)*
Mohamed Ihattaren *(Juventus to Ajax)*
Dejan Kulusevski *(Juventus to Tottenham Hotspur)*
Giovani Lo Celso *(Tottenham Hotspur to Villarreal)*
Ainsley Maitland-Niles *(Arsenal to Roma)*
Pablo Mari *(Arsenal to Udinese)*
Anthony Martial *(Manchester United to Sevilla)*
Tanguy Ndombele *(Tottenham Hotspur to Lyon)*
Sergio Oliveira *(Porto to Roma)*
Krzysztof Piatek *(Hertha Berlin to Fiorentina)*
Rafinha *(Paris Saint-Germain to Real Sociedad)*
Aaron Ramsey *(Juventus to Rangers)*
Matt Targett *(Aston Villa to Newcastle United)*
Adama Traore *(Wolverhampton Wanderers to Barcelona)*
Axel Tuanzebe *(Manchester United to Napoli)*
Donny van de Beek *(Manchester United to Everton)*

"One of only four men in the world it's worth listening to when they talk about soccer"

The late Johan Cruyff on former Dutch team-mate Wim Jansen

River Plate re-signed Colombia midfielder **JUAN FERNANDO QUINTERO** from Shenzhen, **EZEQUIEL BARCO** on loan from Atlanta United and **TOMAS POCHETTINO** on loan from Austin FC. Meanwhile Boca Juniors re-signed **DARIO BENEDETTO** from Marseille for £3m, and **DIEGO VALERI** joined Lanus after nine seasons in MLS at Portland Timbers.

ASIA

Nigeria striker **ODION IGHALO** left Saudi outfit Al Shabab for city and title rivals Al Hilal, while Uruguay international **JONATHAN RODRIGUEZ** left Mexican giants Cruz Azul to join Al Nassr.

Former Arsenal defender **CARL JENKINSON** completed a loan move to Melbourne City from Nottingham Forest.

Appointments, sackings and loans

OUT

EUROPE

EFL side Sunderland fired manager **LEE JOHNSON**, while in Italy **ROBERTO D'AVERSA** was sacked by Sampdoria.

Former Stoke City defender **RYAN SHAWCROSS** retired, while former Arsenal and Belgium defender **THOMAS VERMAELEN** also hung up his boots.

AFRICA

In the wake of the Africa Cup of Nations finals, manager **MILOVAN RAJEVAC** left Ghana and **MONDHER KEBAIER** was fired as coach of Tunisia.

SOUTH AMERICA

A host of players left the Brazilian top flight. Saudi side Al Hilal signed **MICHAEL** from Flamengo, Krasnodar bought **JUNIOR ALONSO** from Atletico Mineiro, **LUIZ ADRIANO** quit Palmeiras for Antalyaspor, and Shakhtar captured **VINICIUS TOBIAS** from Internacional. Meanwhile, **DIEGO COSTA** terminated his contract with Atletico Mineiro.

Free agent... Diego Costa

OBITUARIES

Madrid legend... Paco Gento

Paco GENTO (1933-2022)
In the history of the European Cup, only two *teams* (never mind players) have lifted the trophy on more occasions than Francisco "Paco" Gento. As the only man to take part in all of Real Madrid's first six successes in the competition, he leaves an incredible legacy at the club where he spent all but one of his 19 years as a professional footballer.

Beginning his career at Racing Santander, he was so impressive in a performance against *Los Blancos* that they signed him just three days later.

During the 1950s, he was the local *Madridista* in the international front-line starring Alfredo Di Stefano, Hector Rial, Ferenc Puskas and Raymond Kopa; by his final European triumph in 1966, he was the elder statesman in a line-up comprised entirely of Spanish players.

As a player Gento was a classic winger with a primary role of providing crosses, and was particularly noted for his pace.

His directness blended perfectly with the deft touches of those players around him, and his team-mates appreciated him too. After a slow start to life at the club, Di Stefano said of his new team-mate to club president Santiago Bernabeu: "He has speed and hits the ball like a cannon. You don't learn that...we can teach the rest."

He ended his career in 1971 with 12 La Liga titles, a record that still stands. In 2014, he was named Real Madrid's honorary president.

Francois CARRARD (1938-2022)
The former director-general of the International Olympic Committee and head of the FIFA reform task force.

Ahmet CALIK (1994-2022)
An ex-Turkey international, the Konyaspor defender tragically died in a car crash.

Paul HINSHELWOOD (1956-2022)
Right-back who played 319 games for Crystal Palace and won their Player of the Year award in 1979-80 and 1980-81.

Andrew JENNINGS (1943-2022)
A trail-blazing investigative sports journalist who was crucial in exposing the murky practices at the top of the game.

Jamie VINCENT (1975-2022)
A left-back in the Football League who played over 500 games for various clubs, including Bournemouth and Swindon.

Peter ROBINSON (1935-2022)
A crucial figure in Liverpool's rise to dominance in the 20th century. The Reds won 28 major trophies during his time as club secretary and chief executive.

Eduardo FLORES (1944-2022)
Attacking midfielder in the Estudiantes side that won three successive Copa Libertadores from 1968 to 1970.

Antonio Lima PEREIRA (1952-2022)
Long-serving Porto centre-back who won the European Cup in 1987.

Maurizio ZAMPARINI (1941-2022)
Oversaw Venezia's rise from Serie C to Serie A, then bought Serie B Palermo in 2002 and took them to the top flight too.

Jochenfritz MEINKE (1930-2022)
A Hamburg legend who won the 1960 league title and made over 300 Oberliga Nord appearances – the highest level of German football in the north before the formation of the Bundesliga.

Hans-Jurgen DORNER (1951-2022)
East Germany's second-most capped player with 96 caps, "Dixie" spent his entire club career with Dynamo Dresden. Won East Germany's Player of the Year a joint-record three times, and in 1999 was voted Dynamo's greatest-ever player.

Wim JANSEN (1946-2022)
A vital player in the Dutch Total Football machine of the 1970s, Jansen started in both World Cup finals after winning four Eredivisie titles and the 1970 European Cup with Feyenoord. Later he became Celtic's first foreign manager where he won the league title, the Scottish League Cup and signed Henrik Larsson.

Belgian league

The ups and downs of one of Europe's most intriguing top flights

Can Union Saint-Gilloise script a Leicester City fairy tale? In 2016, the Foxes shocked the world by lifting the Premier League title after barely being expected to achieve survival; now the Belgian underdogs are attempting to do something similar.

Simply returning to the top flight after a 48-year absence was cause for celebration for Union, yet after 22 games of the season the club found themselves top of the league with 50 points.

The team from the Dudenpark are something of a cult club with their pre-war record, art-deco stadium and deep roots in the capital Brussels. Their popularity was enhanced during the first half of the season, as the team coached by Felice Mazzu swept past the opposition.

They played with bravado, applying a flamboyant, attacking style, spearheaded by the striking partnership of Deniz Undav and Dante Vanzeir. On the opening day of the season, Union defeated cross-town rivals Anderlecht 3-1, setting the tone for months of barnstorming football. Their form didn't drop off as the season progressed and there is little to suggest that a collapse is imminent.

Their success has been facilitated by underwhelming performances from the established powerhouses. At Anderlecht, Vincent Kompany has dropped the Pep Guardiola philosophy: he no longer expects his team to play football based on an expansive mix of passing, positioning and pressing, but has settled for a more down-to-earth approach instead. Even without the departed midfielder Albert Sambi Lokonga (Arsenal) and striker Lukas Nmecha (Wolfsburg), that strategy has brought a measure of stability at the tempestuous Brussels club, where coaches tend not to last beyond the third season. Kompany is in his second and the jury is still out on how good he is.

At the start of the season, Club Brugge were threatening to become Belgium's dominant side, seeking their third title in a row and fifth in seven years under coach Philippe Clement. They still have high hopes of retaining the trophy, but not with Clement at the helm: he took charge of Ligue 1 Monaco in January after an inconsistent season in his homeland.

The defending champions replaced him with 49-year-old Dutch coach Alfred Schreuder, an assistant to a long list of notable coaches, including Ronald Koeman, Julian Nagelsmann and Erik ten Hag. Brugge are the third club he has taken charge of, following spells at FC Twente in the Eredivisie in 2014-15, and Hoffenheim in the Bundesliga in 2019-20.

At Brugge, Schreuder will need time to implement his own philosophy, but he has a talented squad at his disposal. Midfielder Hans Vanaken has become more prominent with the national team, the skills of the capricious Noa Lang (opposite) are undisputed, and his fellow Dutchman Bas Dost remains a fine striker. Yet all of them play second fiddle to Charles De Ketelaere's intelligence, versatility, suave touch and maturity. Soon, the new poster boy of the domestic game will move abroad and become a stalwart for Belgium.

The fourth horse in the race for the title is Antwerp. The four-time champions, whose last success came back in 1956-57, have become a firm fixture near the top of the table, but too often internal politics and instability thwart the club in taking the ultimate step towards the Belgian crown.

Chaotic...league leaders Union Saint-Gilloise in action

> While these interesting and interweaving storylines form a rich tapestry of the local scene, they are undermined by controversial off-field concerns

Further down the table, Sint-Truidense VV staged a real coup by landing the 32-year-old Shinji Kagawa. The veteran midfielder of both Borussia Dortmund and Manchester United wants to rejuvenate his career, and should be right at home with STVV, who have Japanese owners, as well as six other Japanese players already on their books – Ko Matsubara, Daiki Hashioka, Daichi Hayashi, Taichi Hara, Tatsuya Ito and Daniel Schmidt.

While these interesting and interweaving storylines form a rich tapestry of the local scene, they are undermined by controversial off-field concerns.

The winter months were toxic, as racism and violence resurfaced in the top flight. After defending champions Club Brugge hosted Anderlecht, Kompany complained: "We were called brown monkeys during the entire match." Yet the Pro League failed to clamp down on any of those problems.

And there is an even bigger crisis to come. As reported by Flemish daily newspaper *De Standaard*, 57 suspects have been named by the federal prosecutor in operation "Clean Hands" – an investigation into allegations of forgery, corruption and match-fixing – including Club Brugge president Bart Verhaeghe, KAA Gent's Michel Louwagie, Standard Liege's Bruno Venanzi, Charleroi's Mehdi Bayat and Steven Martens, former CEO of the Belgian FA.

Not since the 1980s, when

then-champions Standard Liege were implicated in the infamous "Waterschei" match-fixing affair, has Belgian football been rocked by such a scandal.

In October 2018, Belgian authorities raided 44 Belgian clubs and residences across the country in an investigation into allegations of match-fixing and corruption, while a further 13 searches reportedly took place in France, Luxembourg, Cyprus, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia.

Dejan Veljkovic, an agent and suspect in the case, opted to collaborate with the prosecutor – and, according to Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, has made numerous statements against key figures at several top-flight clubs.

At the time of writing, the investigations continue, but the scandal has snowballed. "Clean Hands" has lifted the lid on the underbelly of Belgian football. Above all, the investigation shows the need for an independent regulator in the game, or at least a stringent legal framework. Neither seems likely – not in Belgium nor, for that matter, elsewhere.

Samindra Kunti

Noa Lang

A precocious young Dutch talent with a history of falling out with his coaches

Few players evoke such a strong response as Noa Lang: to most observers, you either love him or hate him. The 22-year-old Dutch winger of Belgian side Club Brugge doesn't seem to mind though. Despite his provocations and often ill-considered statements and actions, he made his debut for the Netherlands in October.

With Lang, controversy has never been far away. He was born in 1999 in the Rotterdam suburb of Capelle aan den Ijssel, where talented players usually end up at Feyenoord. So was the case with Lang, son of a Surinamese father and a Dutch mother, who later married and divorced former Ajax winger and Moroccan international Nourdin Boukhari.

It all started when Lang, an Ajax fan, switched to the Amsterdam side as a teenager. From that moment on he was the target of frustrated Feyenoord supporters, often abused during youth matches or on the streets, and even once forced to flee a stadium.

His actions in the capital didn't endear himself to the Ajax fans either. Numerous incidents ultimately led to him being loaned out to FC Twente and his contract in Amsterdam not being renewed – much to his obvious frustration: "Most of the people loved me, except those who pick the team. They judge me on other things than football qualities." Captain Dusan Tadic and coach Erik ten Hag were among those reported to be displeased by Lang's behaviour. Remarks like "my career comes first" wouldn't have helped his cause either.

His move to Belgium in 2020, then, was welcomed by all concerned. In his first season he finished as the team's top goalscorer and was named the league's best newcomer.

Yet despite his excellent displays, discipline has remained an issue: he was booked seven times in the league last season, a tally that he'd matched by the middle of January, with only one player ahead of him in the booking charts. One of them (his second of the game) came during the derby with rivals Cercle Brugge, when he ripped a poster from the wall.

While these actions could be merely seen as juvenile misconduct, far more serious was an incident after the match against Anderlecht. Along with some fans he was spotted singing alleged anti-semitic songs to the Anderlecht supporters. Lang was ordered by the Belgian FA to visit the national holocaust museum in Mechelen.

Despite the scandal, Lang was called up for his international debut in October. True to form, within five minutes he had defied the notoriously authoritarian Louis van Gaal, switching flanks with Cody Gakpo of his own accord to play on his favoured left side. "I must say he has guts", said Van Gaal afterwards. "But I was quick to switch it back. I wanted to see him on the right."

> "Most of the people loved me, except those who pick the team. They judge me on other things than football qualities"

With the *Oranje* short of options on the right flank, Lang could offer a solution. Yet it remains to be seen if the winger will be selected for the World Cup, particularly with Van Gaal hinting that he may switch to a 5-3-2 formation in Qatar, as he did in 2014. And besides, the coach couldn't be blamed for wondering if Lang isn't too much of a disturbance.

One thing is for sure, though: he can't expect Lang's attitude to change. As he says himself: "It's kind of who I am. It would be boring if everybody was the same."

Klaas-Jan Droppert

Mercurial talent... Lang celebrates after scoring for Club Brugge

Lorenzo Insigne

The Napoli legend's surprise move to MLS side Toronto FC

On Sunday January 23, Napoli captain Lorenzo Insigne came on as a half-time substitute in Napoli's easy 4-1 home win over bottom-of-the-table and seemingly relegation-bound Salernitana. Within two minutes of the restart, Napoli had put the lid on a predictably one-sided game, scoring their third goal through Kosovo national team captain, defender Amir Rrahmani.

At this point, you might have expected Napoli to pull in their oars, stop rowing and just cruise. Insigne, however, had no such intentions. Within five minutes, he was off on a typical left-flank run into the penalty area, winning himself a penalty in the process.

He promptly scored the penalty himself to take his Napoli goal tally to 115, thus joining the legendary Diego Armando Maradona in third place on the club's record goalscorers' ranking. Insigne then celebrated his goal with particular vehemence, running over to the touchline to shout into the TV camera: "*Ti amo e ti amerò sempre*" ("I love you and I will always love you").

There was no secret about Insigne's enthusiastic celebration of a goal that, in the context of a 4-1 home win, was relatively meaningless. The celebration was for the Napoli fans. It went back to a couple of weeks earlier when Toronto FC in Canada had caught the world by surprise with the announcement that they had just concluded a four-year deal with him, worth a reported €8 million per year, to sign him into Major League Soccer next July. The message to the fans was simple: I might be leaving at the end of the season but, in the meantime, I am on your side.

The surprise nature of his transfer was twofold. In Italy, people asked if Napoli were really willing to kiss goodbye to their iconic 30-year-old local hero and team captain, right at the very moment that he has finally seemed to realise all his undoubted potential? Around the world, people were amazed to discover that MLS could attract the services of a great European champion at the very top of his game, rather than an ageing great attracted by the glitz, the glamour and, of course, the dollars.

"I will always love you"...Insigne shows his gratitude to the Napoli supporters

> Agent Vincenzo Pisacane has claimed that, rather than offer a salary increase to one of the heroes of last summer's famous Euro 2020 win, Aurelio De Laurentiis offered to reduce Insigne's wages by 50 per cent

So why did Napoli let him go? Sources close to the club confirm that Napoli owner, cinema magnate Aurelio De Laurentiis, was happy to let Insigne leave. For a start, he saves on the €3.6m net salary he was paying Insigne. For a second, he spells out loud and clear to the entire squad that when he talks cutbacks in these COVID times, he means what he says.

And then, for a third, there was Insigne's role in that infamous *Mutiny On The Bounty* moment back in November 2019, when the Napoli players defied De Laurentiis. In the wake of disappointing results, he had called for them to be sent into a "*ritiro*" – a locked away training camp.

After Napoli had disappointingly drawn 1-1 at home to Red Bull Salzburg in a Champions League group game, De Laurentiis ordered that the players go back to the Napoli training centre of Castel Volturno. Allegedly led by Insigne, and following a blazing row with club deputy president, Edo De Laurentiis (son of Aurelio), the players refused. Rather than climb back onto the team bus, they got into their cars and went home.

All in all, Insigne was not Aurelio De Laurentiis' favourite player. With

Trailblazer... Sebastian Giovinco

his contract expiring in June, Insigne and his agent Vincenzo Pisacane had opened talks about a renewal last autumn. Pisacane has claimed that, rather than offer a salary increase to one of the heroes of last summer's famous Euro 2020 win, De Laurentiis offered to reduce Insigne's wages by 50 per cent.

It quickly became clear to Insigne and his agent that they were never going to come to an agreement with Napoli. So they went looking elsewhere; anywhere but Italy, that is, since Neapolitan-born Insigne had long since decided that he would never play for another Italian club to find himself lining out against Napoli one day.

Insigne was probably thinking the Premier League, La Liga or the Bundesliga. The problem was that, in these COVID times, none of the big fish were biting. In the end, the surprise offer came from Canada. At the age of 30, Insigne simply could not refuse a four-year deal that guaranteed him more than double his current salary.

The fact that the Toronto area is home to more than half a million people of Italian descent no doubt helped too. Likewise, Insigne will have taken account of the recent precedent sent by Sebastian Giovinco. The former Juventus forward enjoyed four very successful seasons at Toronto FC from 2015 to 2019, winning the Golden Boot and MVP in his first season, and the MLS Cup in 2017.

Giovinco also won the last of his 23 international caps in October 2015, overlooked for both Euro 2016 and Italy's failed bid to reach the 2018 World Cup. Insigne will still feature in Roberto Mancini's plans for the Qatar World Cup (assuming Italy get there), but his future in the team beyond 2022 will surely be quesitoned.

Italian football may also be wondering just how one of its newly crowned European champions has opted to leave Italy for what Insigne's former agent, Antonio Ottaiano, indicatively but somewhat unkindly, called "exhibition football, not a proper competition." Maybe, but it sure is a proper salary.

Paddy Agnew

Angel Di Maria

In a team of huge egos, the selfless Argentina winger is the key man

When Achraf Hakimi was sent off against Marseille back in October, Angel Di Maria was the man sacrificed so that Thilo Kehrer could help Paris Saint-Germain see out a 0-0 draw.

This seemed like an easy choice for head coach Mauricio Pochettino, as the alternative was to bring off one of PSG's biggest names: Kylian Mbappe, Lionel Messi or Neymar.

However, when *Les Parisiens* found themselves a goal down against Lille in the very next game, it was Di Maria who took charge. After Messi had been substituted at half-time, the winger drifted into the box before teeing up Marquinhos for the equaliser with a beautifully dinked cross.

The 33-year-old wasn't finished there, as he played a one-two with Neymar and masterfully placed the ball out of Ivo Grbic's reach to score the winner two minutes from time.

That these incidents came one game apart is perfectly indicative of a career that has so often seen him live in the shadows of bigger names, as was also the case at Manchester United and particularly Real Madrid.

Di Maria has always been hugely appreciated by the giants of the game he has called team-mates, as he hinted at when discussing his Madrid departure with *TyC Sports*: "Cristiano [Ronaldo], [Sergio] Ramos, Iker [Casillas]...they fought for me not to leave....what happened happened, but I'm always grateful for those who backed me."

Current club-mate Messi will likely be the most thankful of the lot, though, following last summer's Copa America win – Argentina's first since 1993. Di Maria still has the eternal glory of scoring the winner in the final against Brazil, lofting a delicate finish over Ederson's head.

Having ended Messi's long wait for a trophy with the national team, Di Maria is now tasked with helping PSG to finally win Europe's biggest club competition following a pursuit that has been equally as desperate.

After all, he may not be their biggest name, but the Argentine was PSG's key man when they reached their maiden Champions League final.

> He may not be their biggest name, but the Argentine was PSG's key man when they reached their maiden Champions League final

During the 3-0 semi-final victory against RB Leipzig in 2020, he floated in the free-kick for Marquinhos' opener, calmly converted the second and delivered a pinpoint cross for Juan Bernat to round off the scoring.

PSG look well on their way to regaining the Ligue 1 crown they have grown so accustomed to possessing in recent years, but the Champions League is the prize many associated with *Les Parisiens* are truly after.

Since Di Maria joined in the summer of 2015, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Edinson Cavani, Dani Alves, Blaise Matuidi, Thiago Silva and many others have departed Paris without lifting the European crown.

If the Argentine can bring Champions League glory to the Parc des Princes, his name will go down in the PSG history books regardless of those he lines up alongside.

Danny Lewis

Key man... Angel Di Maria

Mohamed-Ali Cho

The teenager making significant strides for Ligue 1 side Angers

At just 18 years old, Mohamed-Ali Cho is a superstar in the making. After becoming Angers' youngest-ever Ligue 1 goalscorer in a 2-0 victory over Rennes back in August 2021, Cho was called up to Sylvain Ripoll's France Under-21 team a month later, despite having already represented England at U16 level.

It has been a blistering start to his career for the young man from Stains in Seine-Saint-Denis close to Paris. His massive talent has been clear for all to see from the outset on both sides of the English Channel, as he flipped between the academies of West Ham United, Paris Saint-Germain and Everton.

Cho was born in France on January 19, 2004, but moved to London when he was barely a week old. Growing up, his parents frequently moved between England and France.

By the time he was 16, many of Europe's biggest clubs were taking an interest in him, so it came as a shock when he opted for Angers SCO, a small and unfashionable club in the northwest of France. His decision turned a few heads, but Cho's parents were looking for a smaller club where their son would have a clear pathway to the first team.

Philippe Leclerc, Angers' Head of Recruitment at the time, promised the player first-team opportunities within 12 months. Leclerc had initially planned to bed Cho in with the reserves, but that didn't last long, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but mostly because of the boy's enormous talent.

"Three days after joining there was a match during a training session with the reserves," Leclerc recalls. "After 15-20 minutes we realised that he was a class above."

Moving up to join in with the first team didn't seem to pose Cho a problem either. "The first time I spoke to him, we were playing in a reduced size game," said former team-mate Lois Diony. "I could see him wreaking havoc on the pitch. At one point, we found ourselves side by side, and I didn't know him yet. I said to him 'How old are you?' He said '16'. I couldn't believe what I was seeing."

Looking ahead... Cho in action for Angers

> "I said to him 'How old are you?' He said '16'. I couldn't believe what I was seeing"
>
> **Cho's former team-mate Lois Diony**

Mohamed-Ali Cho has been breaking records from the start of his career. The deal with Angers made him the second-youngest player to sign a professional contract in France, aged 16 years, three months and 14 days, and second only to former Rennes wonderkid Eduardo Camavinga. He's also the first player born in 2004 to play and score in Ligue 1.

On fire...Cho celebrates a goal

Since making his Ligue 1 debut in August 2020, Cho has already established himself as a key member of the Angers attack. Last season he made 21 appearances, with all but one coming off the bench, but in the current campaign he has been a regular starter. He's played in all three forward positions, and even appeared in a wing-back role in certain matches, but now seems to have found his best position as one of the two strikers in a 3-5-2 formation under manager Gerard Baticle, where he can show both his technical and physical capabilities. "I have never seen a player who is so physically advanced at his age," says Leclerc of the 6ft striker.

Growing up in English football played an important role in shaping his unique blend of physical and technical ability. "I'm lucky enough to be able to pick and choose what I like from French and English football," says Cho.

Given Angers' well-documented financial struggles, Cho's departure looks highly likely in the summer. The player has hired a lawyer, Philippe Veber, to assist his parents in managing his future. Angers president Said Chabane said that the club is willing to sell, but not at a cut price. When quizzed about the asking price for Mohamed-Ali Cho, Chabane told *Ouest France*: "Between €40m and €50m. He is the only player born in 2004 playing in Ligue 1 who starts and plays with the France U21s. What we are asking for is not just for his current value, but his long-term potential."

With a year and a half left on his contract with Angers, the 18-year-old French youth international forward is the subject of interest from a number of big foreign clubs. Milan, Tottenham Hotspur and Borussia Dortmund look to be leading the race, but all of Europe's big outfits are said to be taking a look at this rare talent.

With Angers open to a sale, it seems inevitable that bigger things are on the horizon for the teenager. Fast, strong, powerful, technical and with a good family behind him, Mohamed-Ali Cho looks set to make it to the very top.

Gabriel Johnson

Ricardo Pepi

The Bundesliga's latest hot American prospect

When 18-year-old striker Ricardo Pepi swapped FC Dallas for Augsburg in January, he became the latest in a long line of American wonderkids making the German Bundesliga their first stop in Europe.

The league has a reputation for developing American players, and a number of current USMNT stars began their European football journey there. These include Chelsea winger Christian Pulisic, formerly of Borussia Dortmund, and midfielder Weston McKennie of Juventus, once of Schalke, while others such as Dortmund's Giovanni Reyna and Tyler Adams of RB Leipzig still play in the league.

Though there is an increasing amount of talent throughout the United States' squad, finding a first-choice striker has proven troublesome. This is why so much hope is being pinned on Pepi's move to Germany, and there is optimism he will follow in the path of the aforementioned stars.

Out in the west Texas town of El Paso lies one of FC Dallas' youth affiliates, and it's here Pepi made the step from local youth games onto the pathway to turning pro.

The net cast by Major League Soccer sides looking for young talent is increasingly large. As well as talent development, clubs also have an eye on making money from player sales. In total, 11 of the top 15 record sales from the league involve young Americans or Canadians. Pepi added his name to that list, joining fellow ex-FC Dallas player Bryan Reynolds, who left Texas for Roma early last year.

Dallas lies to the north of the nation's second-largest state, and its MLS club scours the region for promising talent, gaining a reputation for developing homegrown players. Pepi's hometown of San Elizario sits 560 miles west of Dallas (almost the length of the UK), just south of El Paso by the Mexican border.

Though Pepi, who turned 19 shortly after moving to Augsburg, decided to represent the US, he is a proud Mexican-American. His Mexican culture at home is as important to him as embracing the country in which he happens to have been raised and the national team he chose to represent.

> Pepi was named the league's Young Player of the Year in 2021 after scoring the most goals by a teenager in a single MLS season

And the US are glad he chose them. Only two players have scored more goals as teenagers in MLS than Pepi's 15, and he was named the league's Young Player of the Year in 2021 after scoring the most goals by a teenager in a single MLS season.

He scored on his international debut against Honduras in September, netted a brace in the subsequent fixture against Jamaica and went on to be named US Soccer's Young Player of the Year.

It's safe to say he was ready to make the step up to the Bundesliga where he hopes to emulate his role models, Robert Lewandowski and Erling Haaland. His admiration of these two forwards gives a good idea of the style of player he is – or aspires to be.

Goalscoring is his game, and if they continue to flow in Germany, the United States will believe they've found their new striker.

James Nalton

Wonderkid... Pepi during his Bundesliga debut

eyewitness

Samindra Kunti reports

URUGUAY

This town ain't big enough for all of us

Fernando Fadeuille, the sporting director of Defensor Sporting, sighs. "It is impossible. It is not sustainable," he says. "The majority of Uruguayan clubs have debts and need to sell players to pay those debts, but it is very difficult in a city of 1.5 million inhabitants to have 23 professional clubs. In important cities, in Milan you have two clubs. You can't sustain this."

He knows what he is talking about. After a playing career at Defensor and a slate of other local clubs, as well as brief spells with both Cyprus' Limassol and Colombia's Millonarios, Fadeuille enrolled in a sports management course to transition to an executive role at his former club.

Estadio Centenario... the biggest stadium in Montevideo, a city with 23 professional clubs

He understands the domestic scene, which Defensor have been a part of since 1913, inside out.

The club sits at the southern tip of Montevideo in Park Rodo, alongside a funfair, the national museum of visual arts and the Estadio Luis Franzini in Defensor's purple colours. Uruguay's beautiful capital, replete with blossoming jacarandas and *churrascarias*, has football clubs on every corner.

Wanderers and River Plate are based in the Prado Park, a stone's throw away from each other. To the west, Liverpool remain a reference to the thriving mercantile ties between Uruguay and the English port early in the 20th century. All these neighbourhood clubs have been there since time immemorial – marvellously authentic, yet limited in infrastructure and reach.

Downtown, upstarts Montevideo City Torque – one of the newest members of the City Football Group – play at the legendary Estadio Centenario. A short walk north, the Gran Parque Central hosts Nacional. Penarol are out north.

In 2021, 20 Montevideo clubs took part in Uruguay's top two divisions: 11 in the top tier, and nine in the second. In total there are 34 teams registered as members of the Uruguayan Football Association (AUF) in the city.

They all come in different shapes and forms, rooted in local history, attached to their neighbourhoods, thriving on storied rivalries and the ultimate purpose – to dethrone Penarol or Nacional, the behemoths of the Uruguayan club scene. Season after season, decade after decade, it's a question that consumes Uruguayan football. The duopoly prevailed, wobbled at times, but never succumbed.

One club cannot be understood without the other, their eternal rivalry a part of the national psyche and culture. As so often in South American cities, their rivalry cuts across class lines: Penarol are poor and mainly Italian; Nacional are a bit richer and a bit more Spanish. Since the league's inception in 1900, they have won a combined 99 league crowns. In 2014 Danubio became the last club outside the big two to win the league; 14 years ago, Defensor claimed their fourth and last title.

"In 1976, Defensor broke that hegemony and at that time a lot of people said that it was anti-football," says Fadeuille. "But that is a lie because the team pressed a lot. It was a revolutionary team with strong marking but in possession Defensor played well. It was historic."

Uruguayan *Clasico*... players of Penarol and Nacional vie for the ball

Once a giant of the game, Defensor were relegated in 2019. The club fell on hard times, like much of Uruguayan football, where revenues are small and debts rampant. "The market is very small," says Fadeuille. "In terms of sponsors, it is very little. The companies don't invest in clubs because there is no return. Sales of shirts? Nothing, just Penarol and Nacional, and a little bit Defensor and Danubio."

Then the pandemic struck. The domestic and international transfer market contracted, and so the money dried up. FIFA's annual global transfer report reveals that Uruguay belongs to the top 25 exporters of players worldwide.

It's hardly a bombshell. Defensor has produced players like Flamengo's Giorgian de Arrascaeta and River Plate's Maxi Pereira. In the last two decades, Diego Forlan, Alvaro Recoba, Luis

Hard times... Defensor Sporting's Estadio Luis Franzini

Suarez, Edinson Cavani, Federico Valverde and Rodrigo Bentancur have been some of the headline names from Uruguay to cross the Atlantic and bless Europe with their talent. Victim of the economic imperatives of the modern game as well as the enduring appeal of the Champions League, Uruguayan football has been reduced to a feeder competition: the clubs raise talent and sell it to the wealthiest leagues. It is the dominant model in all of South America, but what happens when the conveyor belt of talent ends?

The downturn in World Cup qualifying and the departure of long-standing national team coach Oscar Tabarez is seen by some as a signal that Uruguay's outsize role in the global game is waning – that another golden epoch is coming to a close. In the 1920s and 1930s, Uruguay were the kings of the global game. The country was one of the first nations with a proper welfare state, one of the reasons for its excellence in the game.

In Latin America, Uruguay is one of the most advanced, progressive and egalitarian countries. It's a high-income economy where cannabis, same-sex marriage and abortion are legal. Yet, the local game is less forward thinking. Football clubs bicker endlessly. The feud between Penarol and Nacional leaves no ground for the common good. Tabarez once said that if there existed a competition in South America for lack of professionalism, Uruguay would be fighting with Bolivia to finish bottom.

There is always the potential for conflict: between the big two, between the big two and the rest, and between the clubs and broadcast company Tenfield. The two giants lionize the TV money, the rest have to survive on crumbs. Penarol and Nacional block any attempt at reform and a more egalitarian distribution model.

Fernando Fadeuille ...sporting director of Defensor Sporting

"The duopoly is neither good nor bad but just the reality," says Jose Fuentes, the president of Nacional. "The TV system is based on subscribers. More than 90 per cent of the fans support Penarol or Nacional. That's what they want to watch and therefore those teams deserve more revenue. We want other clubs to respect that. Nacional and Penarol should get the bigger percentage of the TV income."

In 2021, 20 Montevideo clubs took part in Uruguay's top two divisions: 11 in the top tier, and nine in the second. They all come in different shapes and forms

"Other clubs prefer a format closer to the Premier League distribution model, but with the understanding that it will be hard to implement," says journalist Franco Saxlund, who commentates live matches for *Radio Fenix* at a passionate and frenzied pace. "This does not mean that those who receive less today should not receive a little more money."

The discord has a ripple effect. Talks for an independent league are not advancing either. Clubs want to break away from the national football association (AUF) in a bid to modernise and generate more revenue, but the current broadcast contract with Tenfield runs until 2025. "Some clubs have already established the basis for the Uruguayan Professional Football League (LUFPRO)," explains Saxlund. "The minimum target date is 2023, but it is a slow process and it could drag on for a few more seasons."

Some clubs are more proactive. They have become true businesses, shifting from the FC to the LLC model. In Uruguay, clubs are owned by their members. Indeed, some are still social clubs, like Defensor, with paying members and multiple sports, such as basketball and swimming. A new gym has been completed and the roof for the basketball court is under construction, but as non-profit entities clubs avail of no legal instruments to receive and repay investments.

North of the border, in Brazil, there is a growing trend for clubs to shed their members for investors. Ronaldo became the owner of his boyhood club Cruzeiro while John Textor took over Botafogo. Last December, Inter Miami's investment plans in Montevideo Wanderers were frustrated because the members didn't want to relinquish the non-profit structure or hand control to foreigners.

"It's the way to follow, but it is hard to convince the fans and the members," says Fadeuille. "A group that invests in a Uruguayan club like City Football Group in Montevideo Torque brings a model, a methodology of work and economic resources. Defensor is well organised, but struggles for survival."

At least, the pandemic has proven that the duopoly is not untouchable. Last season, Plaza Colonia were a force. Rentistas and Liverpool also challenged. Defensor, back in the top flight, then can once again work towards toppling the big two and reliving their glory days.

Popular...Penarol fans queue for their team's clash against Fenix

eye witness

Josh Butler reports

ICELAND

There must be something in the water

Thriving... IA players celebrate

On Iceland's west coast, huddled on the shores of Faxafloi Bay, can be found the fishing town of Akranes. With a population of a little under 7,500, it is a small settlement, but it is one with a large history thanks to its resident football club.

Ithrottabandalag Akraness – more commonly referred to by the initials IA – possess a rich pedigree dating back over half a century to when they became the first club from outside of the capital to win the Icelandic league title. Since then, they have lifted the trophy a further 17 times, placing them as the country's joint-third most successful club, and the most successful outside Reykjavik by far.

But this is not the only aspect by which this provincial Icelandic town can claim to be unique.

"As of 2022, we have had 39 players that play or have played professionally abroad," Sigrun Rikhardsdottir proudly proclaims. "That is 0.5 per cent of our entire population."

Sigrun is a lifelong supporter of her hometown club. It is in the blood, you might say: her father was the IA icon Rikhardur Jonsson – Iceland's all-time record goalscorer until 2002 – while during the 1990s four of her uncles and one of her cousins were part of the club's vintage squad that claimed five Icelandic championships in a row – a record at the time.

Although at first glance 0.5 per cent may appear an insignificant proportion, when it is quantified in regard to other nations around Europe, the scale of this seemingly innocuous statistic is revealed. In England, for example, only 0.012 per cent of youth footballers – never mind the whole population – will ever make it to the Premier League.

It is a phenomenon Sigrun and her son Rikhardur 'Rikki' Arnason, who runs the club's social media channels, find difficult to comprehend, let alone explain.

"My generation say it is something in the water," Sigrun says with a laugh. "They say the water up here is so poisonous that we can survive anything."

There is a kernel of truth at the root of this old Icelandic adage. Akranes was founded in the ninth century by Thormodur and Ketill, a pair of brothers from Ireland. For centuries, the town was little more than a hamlet of rudimentary dwellings where only the hardiest of folk could eke out a living fishing the cold, deep waters of this remote corner of the northern Atlantic. This fortitude has been bred into the residents of Akranes for generations.

"Some part of it is definitely genetic. In some families in Akranes, there are good football players generation after generation after generation," explains Sigrun.

In particular, there are two families in Akranes that have been cultivating generations of exceptional footballers. The epoch, as it were, can be ascribed to the 1950s and the emergence of Rikhardur Arnason, who became the town's first regional, national and, finally, international star. He enjoyed a spell at Arsenal at the latter end of the decade and thus became the first player from Akranes to venture beyond the borders of his home

country. He was not by any means the last, however.

It is devilishly difficult for outsiders to track these complex family trees with their myriad branches that continue to bend this way and that throughout the ages, owing in part to Iceland's predilection for patronymic and matronymic naming conventions. As Rikki puts it: "Families basically don't have 'names'."

But many of Sigrun's relatives have enjoyed distinguished careers in the yellow and black of IA, so much so that she immediately counts at least ten of her relatives who have played for the first team, and several who went on to play abroad, most notably Siggi Jonsson, who had spells in England with Sheffield Wednesday, Barnsley and Arsenal before returning to Iceland in 1992 and winning four domestic titles on the spin with his hometown club.

"Siggi was the best," Sigrun recalls fondly of her cousin, who is currently manager of Third Division outfit Kari, "but he left too young. He was under 17 when he left. He wasn't fully grown up and his body wasn't ready yet." He suffered a back injury after joining the Gunners for £475,000 in 1989 – a substantial fee at the time – that restricted him to just eight First Division appearances, and even threatened to prematurely end his career.

Talented town... Ithrottabandalag Akraness' squad

An elegant and technically-gifted midfielder, Siggi Jonsson typifies the type of footballer that emanates from this small provincial town, even to this day, where an exceptional emphasis is placed on the development of ball skills.

IA legend... Siggi Jonsson in action for Arsenal

The town of Akranes, by way of its prestigious football club, has always placed a great emphasis on playing and enjoying the sport from an early age, which perhaps goes some way to explaining why they are so adept at producing such talented young footballers and also why they tend to be plucked from their homes before they reach 21. The strong genetics provide a solid foundation, but the high-quality training is what gives these young boys and girls the tools to excel abroad.

"My grandfather [Rikhardur] always used to say: 'If you want to be good, you must practise more than everyone else.' That is something he believed in very strongly," says Sigrun. As a former player, manager and board member at IA, Rikhardur's philosophy has permeated every facet of the club.

As for children of both sexes in Akranes, football serves as one of the sturdiest pillars of their childhood. IA take on cohorts of footballers as

Glory years...IA players celebrate with the Urvalsdeild trophy during the 1990s

Loyal support... fans at the Akranesvollur stadium

young as three or four years old, so that by the time these children approach the ages continental clubs would usually be accepting entrants into their academy, football is engrained in their way of life. These days, the formative years of prospective young footballers are spent training and playing indoors on synthetic pitches before they move outdoors to the larger grass variants.

Rikki, who like his mother grew up in the town, remembers the ubiquitous presence of the sport in his early life. "In Akranes, it is football, 100 per cent. To be fair, it is football and then PlayStation." Prior to the introduction of Sony's gaming console in 1996, one can assume football ruled with an even more overwhelming supremacy than it does today.

Owing in part to their decades-old heritage for producing young footballers, Iceland's youth ranks are often swollen with IA representatives and alumni, and it is actually here where many of them are scouted by larger teams from abroad.

"Mainly, teams from abroad scout our players when they are away with the international set-up," Rikki says. "Otherwise, the other way our players get spotted is that they talk to their agent and try to secure a trial."

Following a dearth of successful graduates from the academy between 2008 and 2017, IA has since seen six of its players depart to ply their trade across Europe.

Currently, Arnor Sigurdsson, Oliver Stefansson (son of former Stoke City striker Stefan Thor Thordarson), Bjarki Steinn Bjarkason, Stefan Teitur Thordarson (son of former national team goalkeeper Thordur Thordarson), Hakon Arnar Haraldsson (son of former Iceland international midfielder Haraldur Ingolfsson) and Isak Bergmann Johannesson (son of former Aston Villa, Wolverhampton Wanderers and Leicester City midfielder Joey Gudjonsson) all play across the length and breadth of Europe.

Intriguingly, three of the aforementioned IA youth players made their ventures into Europe by way of – or are indeed still playing for – Swedish Allsvenskan side IFK Norrkoping, who have close ties with the Icelandic club.

"Basically, as soon as someone is going to leave us [IA], Norrkoping are the first to know – whether they want them or not," Rikki explains. "It is a good pathway for our players into Europe."

As a new decade dawns, more and more young footballers from Akranes are traversing the Atlantic to find first-team football in far-flung frontiers, even if the club finds itself drifting further and further from the upper echelons of Iceland's elite league.

The last of IA's 18 Urvalsdeild championships came in 2002. Since then, they have been relegated twice, while the capital clubs have dominated.

Scan many of the club's teamsheets from their miraculous 2021 campaign, when they avoided dropping down to the second tier on the final day of the season, and the line-ups are awash with players scarcely out of their teens.

> "As of 2022, we have had 39 players that play or have played professionally abroad. That is 0.5 per cent of our entire population"
>
> Sigrun Rikhardsdottir

Class of 2021...IA stayed up on the final day of last season

There is hope, however. IA reached the Icelandic Cup final last year and, although they succumbed to the might of double-winners Vikingur, there are signs the club are finally shaking off their two-decade malaise.

As a town and a community within which football is thoroughly entrenched, Akranes continues to propagate footballers capable of securing professional contracts beyond the borders of not only their hometown but their home nation.

Whether it is something in these frigid waters, the rich and bountiful heritage or the ubiquitous presence the sport has in young people's lives, Akranes continues to be the paragon of this small, football-obsessed country.

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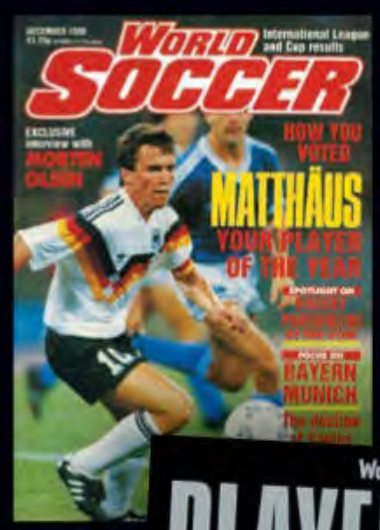

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THE NEXT SPECIAL ONE?

His name is Ruben Amorim and he's a phenomenon. Not since Jose Mourinho burst onto the scene almost two decades ago has a debutant coach had such an explosive impact on Portuguese football

Words: Tom Kundert

In two years as a top-flight manager, Amorim has won the League Cup at Braga, led Sporting to their first championship triumph in 19 years (in addition to winning the League Cup again) and steered the Lisbon club into the Champions League last 16 for only the second time in the club's history. Not bad for a coach in his mid-30s taking baby steps in his new profession.

It is all the more remarkable when you consider that all of the above feats were achieved against the odds. Amorim got the better of traditional powerhouses Porto and Benfica despite working with an inferior squad. When you factor in the tumultuous situation in which the Lisbon club were mired when he was recruited, the turnaround Amorim has brought about is little short of a miracle.

And the evidence is compelling that his sensational start to life in the dugout is no flash in the pan. At the time of writing, Sporting are making a good fist of retaining the title and are going strong in all competitions as the final third of the campaign comes into view. The foundations for a sustained period of success are solid, with Amorim signing an improved contract tying him to the Lions until 2024. Indeed, the bigger threat to Sporting's new-found competitiveness arguably comes not from their domestic rivals, but from the increasingly lascivious looks cast in the direction of Portuguese football's man of the moment by some of Europe's biggest clubs.

Ironically, Ruben Amorim spent the bulk of his playing career at Sporting's bitter cross-town rivals Benfica. One of the first battles he faced upon signing on the dotted line for the Green and Whites in March 2020 was to convince the fans he was the right man for the job. This was no easy task considering his strong association with Sporting's sworn enemies, on top of the fact that Sporting's board had deemed it appropriate to pay Braga €10 million to activate his release clause.

The fee made Amorim the third-most expensive "coach transfer" in football history (behind his fellow countryman, Andre Villas-Boas, when he joined Chelsea, and Brendan Rodgers leaving Celtic for Leicester), despite the fact he had only accumulated a couple of months of top-flight experience. In his short tenure at Braga, however, Amorim immediately displayed a Midas touch. He won ten out of 13 matches, including victories over Porto (twice), Sporting (twice) and Benfica, and lifted the League Cup. It was enough for Sporting president Frederico Varandas to splash the cash for him. Amorim had been invited to coach Benfica's Under-23 team a year earlier, but preferred to try his luck at Braga. Having prospered so auspiciously, the Sporting hierarchy made their move pre-emptively before Benfica came back.

Given Sporting's upturn in fortunes since Amorim took over, it is easy to forget just how chaotic a state the club were in at the time of his arrival. In the wake of the infamous attack on the

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2020/2021

Alcochete training complex by a group of their own supporters, precipitating the contract rescission en masse of several of the club's best players and leading to the demise of firebrand president Bruno de Carvalho, things had not got any better under a new regime. Incompetence from the top marked the administration's first complete season, which included going through four different coaches, bringing in expensive flops, and selling off high-potential players on the cheap. Many supporters considered Varandas and his team of directors unfit for purpose, with the huge investment made to hire the latest coach yet another clanger.

Amorim used the tail end of 2019-20 to evaluate which players best fitted into his set-in-stone 3-4-3 formation. His willingness to trust in the club's youth marked a sea change in relation to his predecessors. Sporting had turned its back on its world-famous Alcochete academy, a key component of the very identity of the club, but from the outset Amorim made sure young players were front and centre of the project.

It was upon the start of Amorim's first full season at Sporting that the tide definitively turned. Working alongside sporting director Hugo Viana, a clever mix of modest signings from some of Portugal's lesser lights, recalled loanees and seasoned campaigners from abroad enabled Sporting to vastly improve the quality of its squad at little cost.

The team quickly gelled as an outstanding first half of the season saw Sporting remain unbeaten in 17 games and drop points only three times to go top of the table. Nevertheless, the Lions had often started campaigns strongly only for the two perennial champions to take over at the top in the second half of the season. The running joke among Benfica and Porto fans was: "Sporting come down with the Christmas lights". It was only a matter of time before something of a patchwork squad would begin to show its weaknesses and buckle, surely? A crucial last-minute victory over Benfica on February 1, coupled with a spate of dropped points by Porto, allowed Sporting to open up a buffer at the top of the table and suddenly their fans started to believe they could finally shatter two decades of the Benfica-Porto duopoly.

Crossing the divide...Amorim played over 150 games for Benfica

> "Thank me? I should be the one thanking them for helping me achieve success"
>
> **Ruben Amorim discusses his players**

That last-gasp Lisbon derby victory was just one example of an astonishing propensity for striking late to salvage points from losing or drawing situations. All told, Sporting earned 20 extra points through goals scored after the 80th minute. A brief wobble threatened to open the door for Porto, but fittingly, it was another 1-0 win – thanks to another goal scored in the final ten minutes at Braga – that effectively sealed the deal. A couple of weeks later, the 1-0 win at home to Boavista enabled Sporting supporters to do something they had not experienced in a generation: call themselves national champions. As the euphoria seeped from the Alvalade stadium and swept throughout the Portuguese capital, the COVID restrictions struggled to contain the wild celebrations.

That Sporting became champions of Portugal with a team of no superstars, whereby the emphasis was on the word "team", is one of the great hallmarks of Amorim's success. The coach's absolute conviction in his tactical system, his ability to transmit his ideas and make the whole squad buy into them, a small tight-knit group in which each player felt they had a role to play, resulted in a classic case of the whole being stronger than the sum of its parts. The team spirit Amorim has engendered is a huge factor that explains why Sporting have consistently over-performed under his stewardship. The never-say-die attitude and lengthy list of triumphs achieved late on in games, with each player summoning his last drop of

Champions...Sporting players celebrate with the league trophy

CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE

ANTONIO SALVADOR
The Braga president hired Amorim for the B team and a few months later did not hesitate in promoting him to the position of first team head coach. His faith was duly rewarded.

HUGO VIANA
A former Young European Footballer of the Year, sporting director Hugo Viana and Amorim have worked in close collaboration to find and/or develop players with the exact profile to suit the coach's system. Amorim has not held back in praising the job his former Braga team-mate has done.

SEBASTIAN COATES
The Sporting captain has been transformed under Amorim, making the journey from an error-prone liability to last season's Player of the Year in the Portuguese Primeira Liga. The coach never tires of praising his captain as an example on the pitch, and for the words of encouragement he offers off it. And the admiration is mutual: "Amorim's main attribute is being up front," says the Uruguayan. "He demands the best from each player but never criticises mistakes."

JORGE JESUS
Ruben Amorim was a Benfica player throughout Jorge Jesus' hugely successful first spell at the club. It is reasonable to conclude that Amorim's coaching style has been significantly influenced by his working with one of Portugal's most decorated tacticians. No doubt he picked up a lot of information, even if it was how not to go about certain aspects of football management. Both the conservative playing style of Amorim's teams and his calm and composed media apparitions are almost diametrically opposed to what one associates with Jesus.

FREDERICO VARANDAS
The doctor-turned-president agreed to pay the €10 million release clause to bring Amorim to the Portuguese capital. It was an expensive lottery ticket, but a winning one. With a long-awaited championship triumph in the bag, a huge increase in the net value of the squad, and millions of euros flowing in from Champions League qualification and progression, Amorim was in fact cheap at the price.

energy for the common cause, is testament to this team spirit.

Beyond the positive results on the pitch, Amorim has also brought to the club something more intangible yet just as important: a clear sense of direction, ambition and razor-sharp focus, reflected through his crystalline communication skills. The name of a popular Twitter account can be translated as: "How much time is left until Ruben Amorim speaks?" which simply counts down the days, hours and minutes until the Sporting manager next talks to the media.

His pre-match and post-match press conferences are a breath of fresh air, containing none of the vacuous clichés that often characterise these occasions, or the barbs shot at referees and the Portuguese football authorities for supposedly biased decisions. Such side stories are conspicuous by their absence with Amorim. Adopting a calm, collected and jovial demeanour, where clear messaging is evident, Amorim masterfully deflects all questions fishing for controversy and makes a point of shifting the plaudits for the team's success to others.

Asked if the players who have become internationals and seen their careers take off under his tutelage had expressed their gratitude to him, he replied: "Thank me? I should be the one thanking them for helping me achieve success." When asked if Amorim the footballer (a workmanlike but unspectacular player, in the image of his Sporting side) would fit perfectly into this team his answer was: "Amorim the player would not be good enough to get into this side." On the night Sporting beat Boavista to be crowned champions of Portugal, Amorim made a point of holding the celebratory post-match press conference flanked by his entire coaching staff either side of him, a visible symbol of the collective spirit he has instilled throughout the entire playing and coaching structure.

The healthy cocktail of optimism and realism in his responses was again in evidence when asked for his thoughts on the Champions League round of 16 draw, which pitted Sporting against Manchester City. "They are perhaps the best attacking team in the world, with perhaps the best coach in the world. Our chances are very slim, just like they were very slim to win the league last season," he replied.

Surmounting the seemingly insurmountable has been a feature of Amorim's coaching career to date. Time will tell if he can mastermind another incredible feat on the biggest of stages, but whether or not Sporting pull off a major shock against City, Amorim looks set fair to be making headlines for years to come.

Mentor...Amorim barks out some instructions during the Lisbon derby

Question time

ATLETICO MADRID

DOES DIEGO SIMEONE HAVE THE ANTIDOTE TO HIS SIDE'S CHRONIC LACK OF FIREPOWER?

As proven by their sub-par goal haul in the group phase (a meagre seven goals in six ties), Atletico have struggled to be clinical in this season's competition.

Round of 16 opponents Manchester United hardly constitute a rear-guard fortress, yet Simeone will only be too aware that answers have to be found in this ailing department. A killer instinct in front of goal is just as vital to the Simeone creed as his other commandments: high energy, commitment, solid defensive organisation and street smarts.

Low scoring... no team in the last 16 scored fewer group-stage goals

Atletico's difficulties in attack are many and varied. Uruguayan *goleador* Luis Suarez has been out of form and out of favour, a pale shadow of the dead-eye hit man whose 21 goals fired the red-and-white stripes to their first Spanish league title in seven years last term. Young Portuguese whizz-kid Joao Felix is still prone to inconsistency, one day a marvel, the next anonymous, while French forward Antoine Griezmann has only on occasion performed to his world-beating potential since returning from Barcelona in the summer.

Suarez, now 34, has proved the thorniest of the problems. Not only has he scored just one Champions League goal for Atletico, his relationship with Simeone has deteriorated since being demoted to the bench. The subsequent dressing room toxicity represents pure kryptonite to Atletico: squad unity, an "us against the world" frame of mind, is normally a given at the Wanda Metropolitano. A brooding, truculent Suarez was never going to be appreciated by Simeone, hence Atletico's willingness to cut him loose.

When Atletico ran riot last season, everything was geared to Suarez the penalty-box predator, the *Colchoneros* flooding forward to supply him with chances. But with Atletico regressing in La Liga this term and Suarez losing his mojo, the parameters have changed. Opting to go back to Atletico basics, Simeone now wants more flexible frontrunners, individuals who can contribute outside the box, who like to run into space.

For the Manchester United tie, Simeone's plan should revolve around a striking duo made up of Griezmann or Joao Felix associated with the much-

Misfiring...Atletico forwards Antoine Griezmann and Luis Suarez

Not only has Suarez scored just one Champions League goal for Atleti, his relationship with Simeone has deteriorated

underestimated Argentine Angel Correa. The latter is a particular favourite of Simeone, who loves his gutsy style, strong all-round game and selfless attitude. With Atletico since 2015, Correa recently appeared in his 300th game for the club, thus making him the third-most loyal player in the current squad (behind Spain midfielder Koke and Slovenia goalkeeper Jan Oblak).

Another striker who could come into contention is the young Brazilian Matheus Cunha, 22, who was recruited from Hertha Berlin in the summer for €25 million.

BAYERN MUNICH

WILL ALPHONSO DAVIES BE AVAILABLE AGAINST SALZBURG AFTER CONTRACTING COVID-19?

It will be touch and go. After testing positive and going into isolation, the Canadian left-back was found to be suffering from mild myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart. If he misses out, Austrian Marcel Sabitzer could step in.

COVID doubt... Alphonso Davies

SPORTING

WHO IS THE LATEST TOP PROSPECT OFF SPORTING'S NON-STOP ASSEMBLY LINE?

In his first full season as a regular starter for the Lions, 20-year-old centre-back Goncalo Inacio is going from strength to strength. An exceptional left-footed stopper, who lines up on the right-side of Sporting's three-man defence.

Top prospect... Goncalo Inacio

MANCHESTER CITY

WHY HAS £100 MILLION MAN JACK GREALISH NOT HIT THE HEIGHTS THIS SEASON?

Essentially Grealish is finding it hard to adjust to Pep Guardiola's style of play. At old club Aston Villa, Grealish popped up everywhere. At City, though, he is instructed to stay wide all the time. The learning curve is a steep one.

Still adjusting... Jack Grealish

INTERNAZIONALE

CAN INTER'S CENTRAL DEFENSIVE TRIUMVIRATE STAND UP TO LIVERPOOL'S HIGH-OCTANE ATTACKING ASSAULTS?

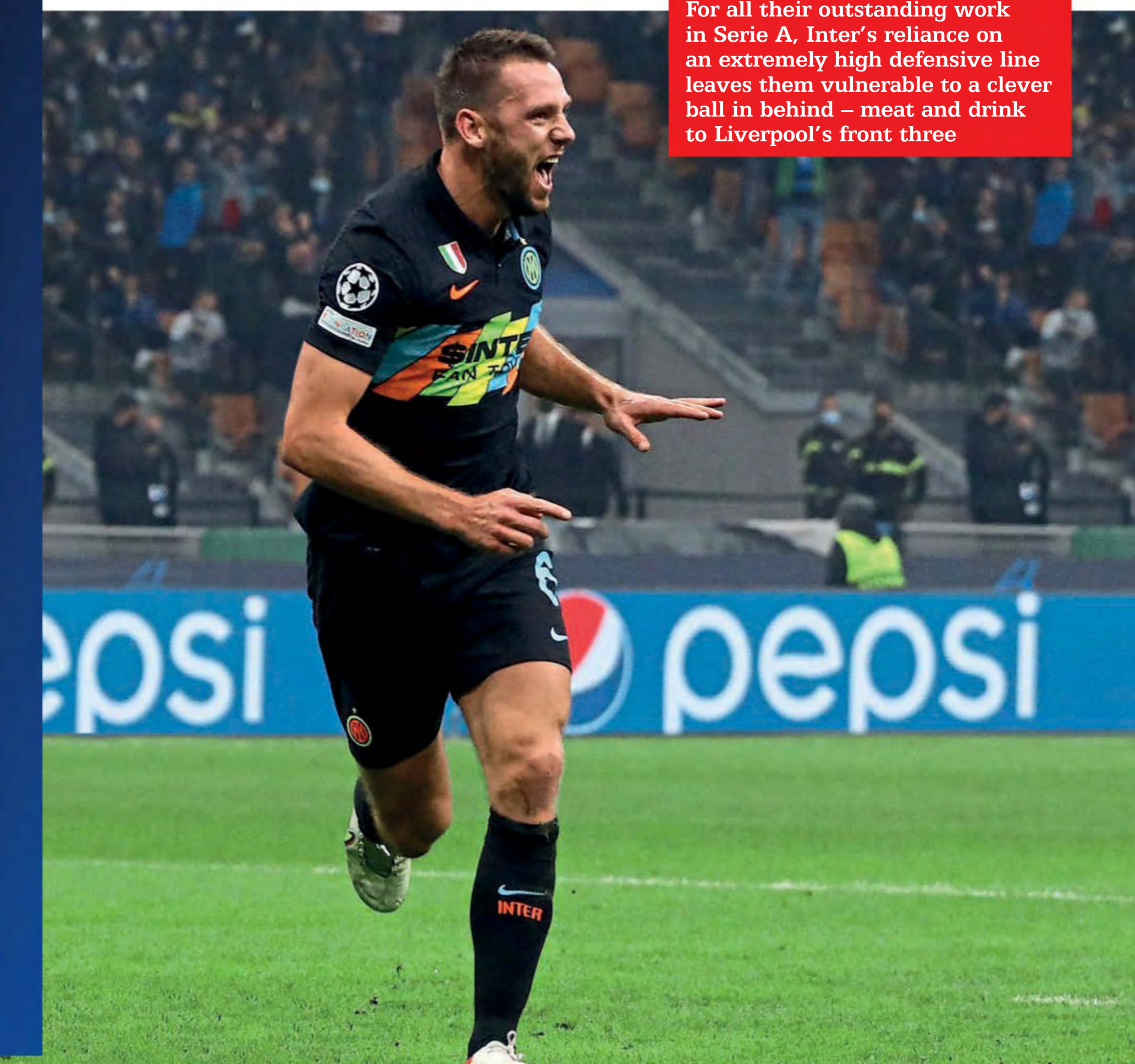
Last season under coach Antonio Conte, a *Nerazzurri* back-line of the Dutchman Stefan de Vrij, Slovakia's Milan Skriniar and hot young Italy prospect Alessandro Bastoni formed the cornerstone of Inter's Serie A triumph, the club's first *Scudetto* in a decade. Now for the unit's next challenge, and what a mammoth job it is: keeping Mohamed Salah, Sadio Mane and Diogo Jota at bay.

The smart money says that this configuration of the Inter rear-guard – which new coach Simone Inzaghi continues to deploy – will be hard-pressed to stymie the Merseyside marauders. For all their outstanding work in Serie A, Inter's reliance on an extremely high defensive line leaves them vulnerable to a clever ball in behind – meat and drink to Liverpool's front three.

Conversely, Inter's defensive unit does have a lot going for it. They radiate physical presence and tenacity, they play with discipline, they all read the game well and are especially strong in their covering duties. All in all, they make a magnificent team, with De Vrij usually in *Libero* mode, Skriniar – normally lined up to the right – as the one-on-one marking specialist and Bastoni on the left, a fast-improving 22-year-old who combines aerial power with consummate comfort on the ball.

Known as "Gerry" to his team-mates because of his long, giraffe-like neck, Bastoni is one of the most creative and attack-minded central defenders in

For all their outstanding work in Serie A, Inter's reliance on an extremely high defensive line leaves them vulnerable to a clever ball in behind – meat and drink to Liverpool's front three



Defensive rocks... Stefan de Vrij (L) and Milan Skriniar (R)

Europe at the moment. At times, he seems to be everywhere on the pitch, one moment winning a duel in defence, the next racing forward to play a one-two with a team-mate or to put in a cross. He really is the X factor of the Inter line-up.

Compared to Antonio Conte's time in charge, when defensive rigidity was the order of the day, the Inter back-line certainly appear to enjoy much more freedom under new boss Simone Inzaghi. De Vrij and Bastoni, for example, often make for extra bodies in the midfield mix.

Needless to say, Inzaghi would love to achieve such overloads against Liverpool,

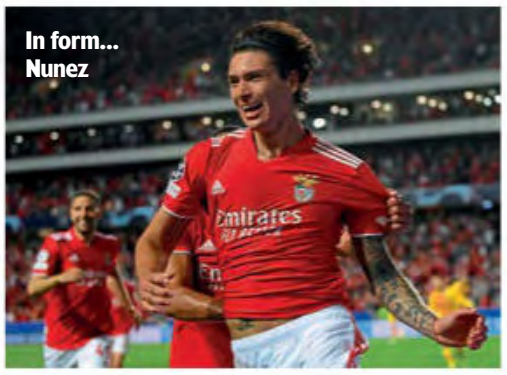
X factor...Bastoni

to turn the tables on Jurgen Klopp. But will the opportunity arise? Liverpool have the intensity and speed of execution to put any defence on the back foot for long periods. In this tie, Inter's central defenders probably will have to concentrate on their primary task – standing firm against wave upon wave of Red pressure. Inzaghi is likely to put pragmatism over adventure in this double-header, aiming to face down Liverpool's go-go-go menace with a tactical plan based on stifling and hitting on the break. Slugging it out with Liverpool is not a healthy option.

BENFICA

CAN DARWIN NUNEZ SAVE BENFICA'S SEASON?

Like Atletico, Benfica also scored just seven goals in the group stage. Nunez scored three of those, and ended 2021 with 12 goals in 11 games. With Benfica's league title bid all but over, a strong Champions League run is their best chance of a successful season.


In form... Nunez

AJAX

HOW FAR CAN THE FREE-SCORING AMSTERDAMMERS GO?

Only Bayern Munich have scored more Champions League goals than Ajax this season, with Ivory Coast international Sebastien Haller accounting for half of their 20 goals. Having swept aside Sporting in the group stage, the Dutch side will be favourites against Benfica. Is another semi-final on the cards?

Free scoring...Ajax forwards celebrate

CHELSEA

IS THE BLUES' £97.5 MILLION MAN ROMELU LUKAKU A LOST CAUSE?

The Belgian powerhouse is a fish out of water in Thomas Tuchel's system, who mainly uses him with his back to goal in hold-up mode. Lukaku offers much more running in behind on the counter attack, yet Chelsea have thrived when deploying a false nine to lead the line.

Unconvincing... Romelu Lukaku

LILLE

HOW MUCH OF A FACTOR WILL THE STADE PIERRE-MAUROY "CABBAGE PATCH" BE?

These days, most elite playing surfaces resemble snooker tables. Sadly, such a description does not apply to the home turf of the reigning Ligue 1 champions, a dilapidated field of play currently regarded as the worst in the French top flight.

Barely a week has gone by this season without critics slamming the poor conditions underfoot and, in an act of sheer desperation, the pitch had to be relaid during the winter break. The owners of the stadium – a company called Elisa who lease it to the club – simply had no choice but to start afresh. Back in the autumn, a fungi was discovered in the turf and despite repeated attempts to eradicate it, none proved successful.

Nor is it a new phenomenon. Ever since the Stade Pierre-Mauroy opened its doors in 2012, the grass has, more often than not, been sub-standard and, as one of the venues for Euro 2016, Lille were embarrassingly forced to paint some of the field green to conceal the bare patches. Many are of the opinion that the architecture of the arena is to blame, the design of the roof restricting the pitch's exposure to light and air. Not enough air is able to circulate and in a humid environment without sun, unwelcome guests can emerge.

Logically, a less than pristine field should be a great leveller when Lille host Chelsea in the second leg of their last-16 tie. The West London outfit, defending their Champions League crown, arguably have more technically accomplished players than Lille and will surely be more at a disadvantage on an unpredictable surface.

Pitch problems... the cut up playing surface during Lille v Wolfsburg

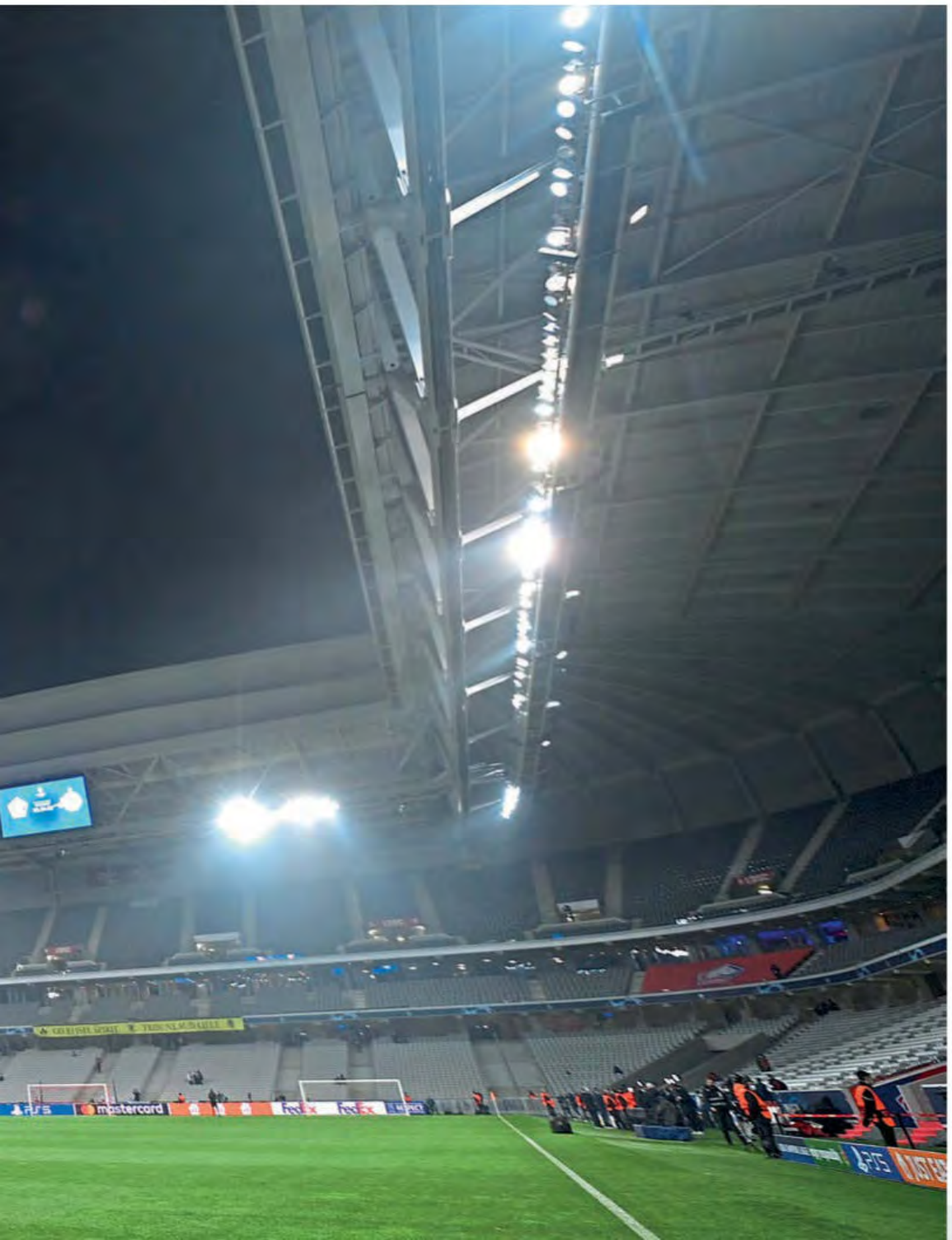
It's equally fair to say that it cramps Lille's style too. A team whose attacking play is largely based on its strength in one-on-one situations, Lille's creative players and forwards always run the risk of having their best plans thwarted by a bobbling ball. On a pitch they cannot trust, they have to play more conservatively – to shun flourishes and risk-taking.

"With the pitch we have, it's very difficult to bring the ball out quickly from the back, to create at high tempo without making a technical mistake," declared Lille coach Jocelyn Gourvennec. "Sometimes we have plans but are not able to apply them because of the pitch. We have a real problem when we have to take the initiative at home. I don't want to hit out at the groundsmen. It's a structural rather than a human problem. I'm not attacking anyone when I say this. It's just an observation."

As any pitch expert will tell you, it's very difficult to right the wrongs of a pitch in the course of a season. Who would blame Chelsea if they went out with all guns blazing in the first leg at Stamford Bridge, looking to kill off the tie.

Barely a week has gone by this season without critics slamming the poor conditions underfoot and, in an act of sheer desperation, the pitch had to be relaid during the winter break

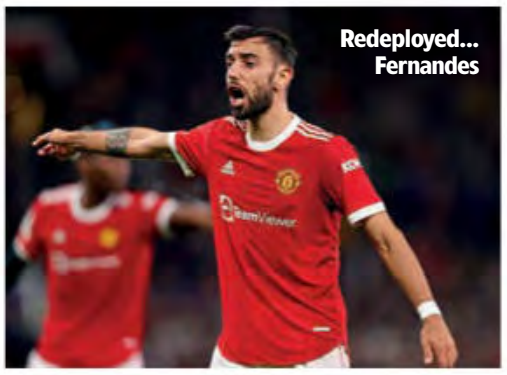
"Cabbage patch" ...Lille's Stade Pierre-Mauroy



MANCHESTER UNITED

WILL BRUNO FERNANDES BENEFIT FROM A POSITIONAL SWITCH?

Thus far, the redeployment has worked well, with Fernandes rediscovering his form since being moved to a No.8 role under Ralf Rangnick. In box-to-box mode, the Portugal international has more freedom to go where his instincts lead him, not only operating centrally.



Redeployed... Fernandes

VILLARREAL

CAN THE YELLOW SUBMARINE'S SET-PIECE SPECIALIST UNDO JUVE?

During the last couple of months, Unai Emery's Villarreal have racked up goal upon goal from corners. Juventus and their coach Massimiliano Allegri will be very aware of the danger posed by dead-ball specialist Dani Parejo and the aerial ability of Gerard Moreno and Pau Torres.

Set-piece specialist... Dani Parejo

JUVENTUS

HOW MUCH WILL JUVENTUS MISS STAR WINGER FEDERICO CHIESA?

Losing Chiesa for the rest of the season to damaged cruciate ligaments will be a massive blow for Juve. The ex-Fiorentina wide-man is a veritable game-changer, arguably the most talented player on the club's roster. The burden of providing a goal threat will now fall heavily on the shoulders of new boy Dusan Vlahovic.

Out for the season...Chiesa

RED BULL SALZBURG

IS THERE ANY CHANCE OF A GIANT KILLING VERSUS BAYERN MUNICH?

Recent history suggests that Red Bull Salzburg's hopes of upsetting their close neighbours – separated by just 110 km – are slim to non-existent. Last season in the Champions League group phase, Bayern twice ran out comfortable winners against the Salzburger, romping to a 6-2 win in Mozart City and winning 3-1 at home. In the last decade, Bayern have only failed to reach the last eight of the Champions League on one occasion (losing to Liverpool in the round of 16 in 2018-19) and during this period have been at least semi-finalists seven times. By way of contrast, this is only Salzburg's third campaign in Europe's premier competition.

For Salzburg to prevail, a large cloud of complacency would have to descend on the Allianz-Arena. Yet Bayern appear most unwilling to take anything for granted. Bayern director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic recently claimed that in his side's clashes with Salzburg last term, it was anything but one-way traffic, that the heavy scorelines did not reflect the balance of play. New Bayern coach Julian Nagelsmann was equally respectful on hearing the draw, describing the Austrians as "awkward opponents".

"Salzburg are a top team, who will make life difficult for us," said Nagelsmann. "They have a lot of talented youngsters. We will have to be focused from the start in both games. They will look to put us under pressure with their high-pressing game and we'll need a good response."

While the Salzburg defence is almost certain to creak against a brilliant Bayern attack spearheaded by the prolific Robert Lewandowski, the Austrians do have the wherewithal to hurt the Bavarians in other areas.

Rematch...Bayern thrashed Salzburg in last season's competition

Salzburg are lightning-quick on the counter, able to turn defence into attack in the blink of an eye; they are very adept at creating chances with an accurate flighted ball over the top and, in the Swiss international Noah Okafor and rising German star Karim Adeyemi, they have pair of speedy and opportunistic strikers.

Adeyemi has admirers all over Europe and has been strongly tipped to move to Bayern in the not-too-distant future. He now has an ideal chance to justify the hype.

Star striker... Karim Adeyemi

Bayern would also do well to keep an eye out for teenage super-sub Benjamin Sesko. Many experts in Austria are waxing lyrical about the 18-year-old Slovenian front-man, comparing him in style to Erling Haaland, who, of course, cut his pro teeth at Salzburg.

The Austrians are most unlikely to be

"Salzburg are a top team, who will make life difficult for us. They have a lot of talented youngsters. We will have to be focused from the start in both games"
Bayern Munich coach Julian Nagelsmann

overawed by the Bayern ogre. Not surprisingly for such a young team (average age: 23.2 years), they play with hunger, fearlessness and supreme confidence. After beating Sevilla, Wolfsburg and Lille in the group stage, they will have no intention of meekly accepting their fate versus Bayern. "We also have quality in our team," says skipper and full-back Andreas Ulmer. "We've often demonstrated that and we'll do so in these games with Bayern. We'll look to play our own game, to go forward and show bravery. Maybe we can spring a surprise. It's a knockout duel. Anything is possible."

LIVERPOOL

HAVE THE REDS FOUND A NEW GOALSCORING HERO IN FABINHO?

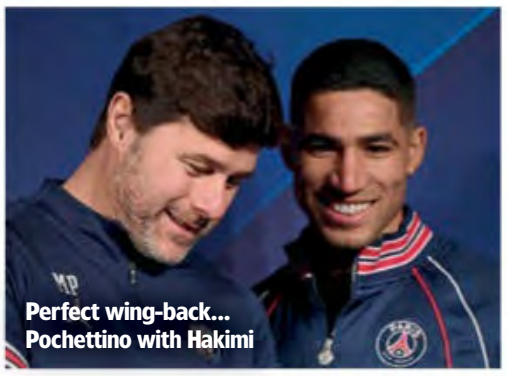
Only sporadically on the scoresheet since arriving from Ligue 1 Monaco in the summer of 2018, the Brazilian defensive midfielder suddenly has discovered a knack for finishing. He hit three goals in a week in January, scoring four in total during the month.

Goalscoring form...Fabinho

PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN

WILL MAURICIO POCHETTINO SWITCH TO A 3-5-2 SYSTEM?

With excellent wing-backs Nuno Mendes and Achraf Hakimi shuttling back and forth, such a formation would make sense. Pochettino may also see the new module as a chance to bed in veteran Sergio Ramos, who has struggled with injuries this term.


Perfect wing-back... Pochettino with Hakimi

REAL MADRID

CAN VINICIUS JUNIOR BUILD ON HIS SENSATIONAL FIRST HALF OF THE SEASON?

The 21-year-old Brazilian winger has amassed goals and assists in industrial quantities this term. Thanks to his tricky dribbling skills, work ethic and speed off the mark, the youngster makes Real tick in transition. However, he has looked a little jaded since the turn of the year.

Attacking tyro...Vinicius

Ones to watch

Nick Bidwell picks out 12 players to keep an eye on in the knockout stages

Fans' favourite... Teun Koopmeiners

Teun KOOPMEINERS

ATALANTA

"Koopmania" has taken hold in a big way at the Stadio di Bergamo, where the Atlanta faithful worship at the feet of Dutch midfielder Koopmeiners.

Soon to turn 24, Koopmeiners did not exactly look ready for the anointing oil when moving to Lombardy from Eredivisie outfit AZ Alkmaar on the last day of the summer 2021 transfer window. In the eyes of his new Serie A fan base, he had it all to prove, merely a non-playing member of the Netherlands' Euro 2020 squad and never having participated in the Champions League.

But without fuss or false starts, he quickly struck a chord with the *Nerazzurri* faithful, winning them over with his unbounded energy, vision, creativity, composure in the tightest of spots and leadership qualities. New arrivals on the Italian scene often have difficulty adjusting to the tactics-heavy *Calcio* culture. The cerebral Koopmeiners, though, has taken it all in his stride, cutting an impressive figure of elegance, power and quick thinking.

As his former AZ coach Pascal Jansen points out, he has "a left foot of gold" which serves many different purposes. He has an incredible range of passing, especially excelling in cross-field switches of play, and long, raking balls straight to the feet of a team-mate. His ball control is of the adhesive variety, he is great in triangles, his set-piece delivery is peerless and he boasts a hammer of a long-range shot.

As his former AZ coach Pascal Jansen points out, Koopmeiners has "a left foot of gold"

In his last two seasons with AZ (2019-20 and 2020-21), he scored no fewer than 33 goals in all competitions, albeit fortified by a heavy smattering of penalties. With Atalanta, he has yet to find his shooting boots – only registering a couple of goals in the first half of the season – but, with time, will surely improve on that quota.

Atalanta, renowned for scouring the globe for value-for-money acquisitions and turning them into high-flyers, can only be glad that they won the race for Koopmeiners' signature. Leeds United, Arsenal, Roma, Nice and Monaco were all in the queue to wrest him away from AZ. Fortunately for Atalanta, they proved

Super signing... Ferran Torres

Ferran TORRES
BARCELONA

Barcelona head coach Xavi recently described the club's latest purchase as a "spectacular signing" and should be proved right. Torres, bought for €55m from Manchester City, is a huge talent and can play in any number of attacking-third positions.

Victor OSIMHEN
NAPOLI

The Sky Blues' top scorer in Europe this term with four goals, the Nigerian striker clearly prefers continental action, where defences are not so compact as in Italy. Has bounced back well after a serious shoulder injury last term.

GREGOR KOBEL
BORUSSIA DORTMUND

Behind a Dortmund back-line that is not always as watchful as it should be, the 24-year-old Swiss international has a well-deserved reputation for pulling the fat out of the fire. Not bad at all for his first season in the Ruhr.

Wenderson GALENO
PORTO

Previously on the books of Porto but unable to go beyond their B team, the Brazilian left-winger came on strong at Rio Ave and Braga to seal a return to the Dragons in January. With six goals in the group stage for Braga, he is the joint top scorer in this season's competition.

Jarrod BOWEN
WEST HAM UNITED

After an unfashionable rise to the Premier League, starting at Hereford United before joining Hull City and then the Hammers, it has taken a while for the world to wake up to Bowen's talents. More impressive displays in Europe would help to drive the point home.

Catching the eye... Jarrod Bowen

Martin ZUBIMENDI
REAL SOCIEDAD

Now in his second full season as a Sociedad starter, the homegrown talent is nothing less than the midfield brains of the side, a player with metronomic passing ability. Won a silver medal with the Spanish Olympic team last year.

Karl TOKO-EKAMBI
LYON

The other man to hit six goals in the group stage seems determined for international success in 2022, having impressed for Cameroon at the Africa Cup of Nations. Able to operate off either flank or as a central striker.

Patrik SCHICK
BAYER LEVERKUSEN

Leverkusen largely negotiated the group stage without Schick, who only played 61 minutes as his side topped Group G. Having Thursdays off helped him hit 18 Bundesliga goals in 17 games, and he'll be unleashed for the knockout rounds.

Christopher NKUNKU
RB LEIPZIG

The Paris-born attacking midfielder has been in the form of his life this season, piling up goals and assists in both the Bundesliga and Champions League. "He has practically no weaknesses," says his former coach Jesse Marsch.

In form... Nkunku

Aurelien TCHOUAMENI
MONACO

The 22-year-old has established himself as Monaco's midfield metronome, a France international of seven caps, and one of the most in-demand players in Europe. A strong campaign in the rest of the competition will only enhance his burgeoning reputation.

LUIZ FELIPE
LAZIO

Classy Italo-Brazilian centre-back, who was called up by *Azzurri* coach Roberto Mancini for a three-day training camp in January. The 24-year-old's recent good form has seen him attract interest from the likes of Barcelona, Milan and Inter.

the most persuasive and persistent of the chasers, finally getting a €12 million deal over the line, a ridiculous fee for a player of such class and potential. Koopmeiners has revealed that one of the factors in his decision was a chat while on national team duty with fellow Dutch international Marten de Roon, currently in his second stint with Atalanta.

According to Dutch football insiders, Koopmeiners was so determined to move to Atalanta, he willingly gave up his transfer commission.

Koopmeiners was AZ through and through, spending 13 years there as an academy adolescent, youth, reserve and first-team stalwart. A pro debutant at the age of 19, he once proved his versatility with a spell in central defence and frequently skippered the side. Evidently, a man for all seasons.

Ones to watch

Who can take their team to the first-ever Europa Conference League title?

Cengiz UNDER

MARSEILLE

In form... Cengiz Under

In a resurgent, gung-ho Marseille side which new Argentine coach Jorge Sampaoli has redesigned from top to bottom, Turkish right-winger Cengiz Under has been a key factor in the upgrade, always on hand to light up proceedings with attacking fireworks galore.

Full-backs know they will have to work overtime when coming up against the 24-year-old loanee from Roma. He is speedy, tricky, elusive and playing with sky-high confidence, backing his expressive skills and vivid imagination to overcome any obstacle in his path.

Modelling his game on the old Dutch master Arjen Robben, he is at his best on the right flank, cutting inside before curling in an unstoppable left-footed shot. Defenders know exactly what he intends to do, yet seem totally unable to counter it.

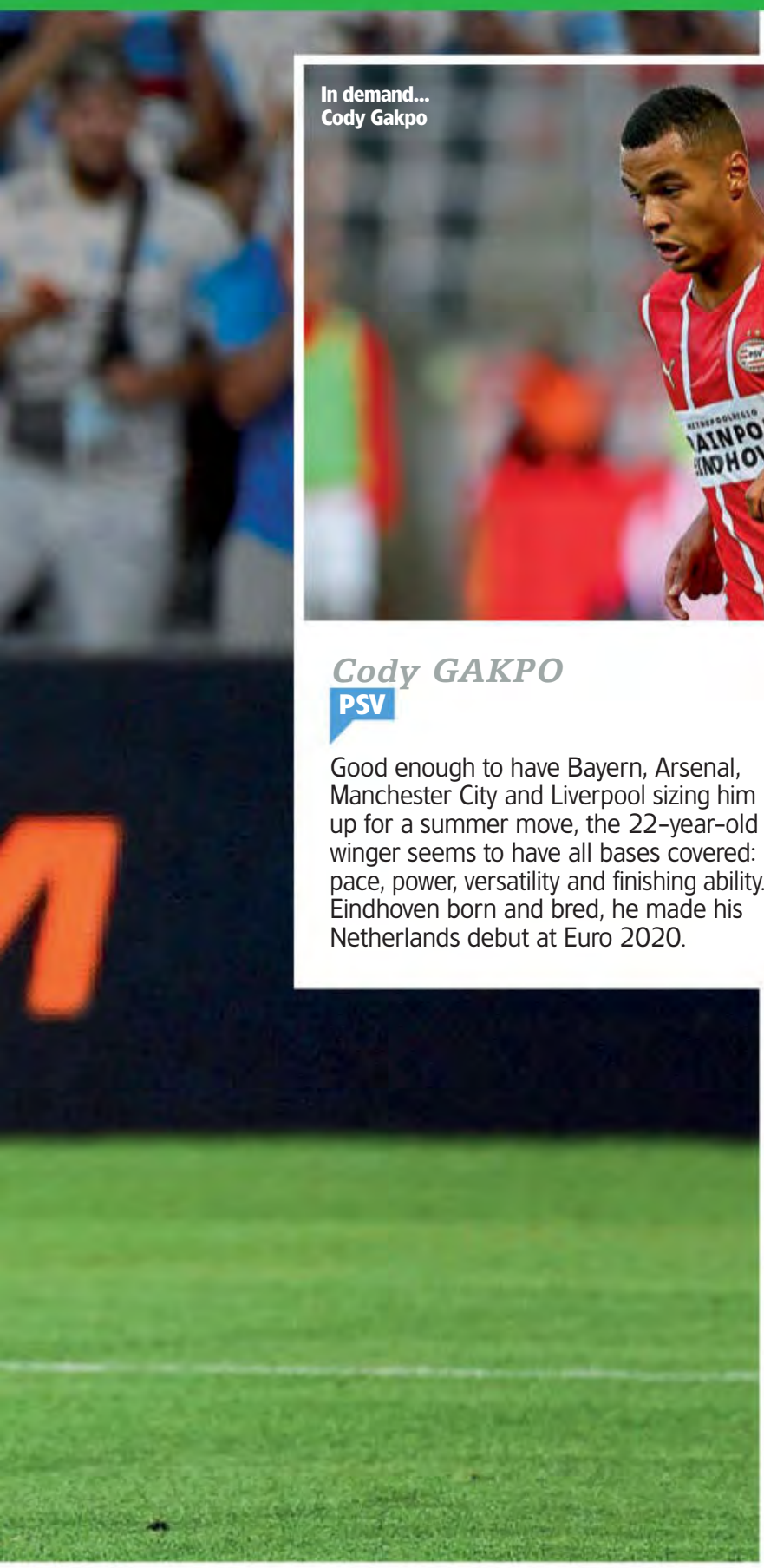
What would OM do without him? Coach Sampaoli certainly appreciates him, praising him to the heaven in a recent press conference for his bravery, pointing out that in contrast to most of his team-mates, the pint-sized Turk is never afraid to shoot from the edge of the box.

Under, who began his pro career in Turkey with Altinordu, is equally happy with what Sampaoli offers him: "Here in Marseille I can perform to my instincts, to play as I see fit," he told French TV station *Canal Plus*. "In attack, I am free. And that's very important for me. Sampaoli is someone with a lot of energy, who is full of fire and passion. I'm really delighted to work with him. Even before coming here, I had him on the phone and I could feel his energy."

It cannot be over-emphasised how much Marseille rely on Under and club skipper and playmaker Dimitri Payet for offensive inspiration. With both in outstanding form this season, Marseille very much have a winning ticket, one which should, if all goes accord to plan, result in the Provencal outfit qualifying for next season's Champions League.

For obvious reasons, Marseille are very keen to transform his current

Full-backs know they will have to work overtime when coming up against the 24-year-old



In demand... Cody Gakpo

12-month loan deal into a permanent arrangement. They have an option to sign him to a three-year contact for just €10 million and, although OM are not the most financially stable of clubs, they surely will come up with the funds to keep him on board.

As for Under, the colour and fervour of the Stade Velodrome suits him down to the ground. "I'm proud to be here," he told the TV programme *Telefoot*. "I want to help restore to this club the prestige it deserves. I want to stay 100 per cent. Everybody is in agreement that I continue my adventure here."

After flopping on loan at Leicester City last season – not making a single first-team appearance beyond February because of injury – life has turned full circle for Under, the freewheeling toast of the Velodrome.

Cody GAKPO
PSV

Good enough to have Bayern, Arsenal, Manchester City and Liverpool sizing him up for a summer move, the 22-year-old winger seems to have all bases covered: pace, power, versatility and finishing ability. Eindhoven born and bred, he made his Netherlands debut at Euro 2020.

Mergim BERISHA
FENERBAHCE

Sharp and intelligent German-born striker of Kosovan lineage. A member of the Germany Under-21 squad that won last year's European Championship, he is in his first season in Istanbul following a switch from Red Bull Salzburg.

Lukas PROVOD
SLAVIA PRAGUE

Immensely talented winger who made the Europa League Squad of the Season last term and was voted the MVP of the Czech League in 2020-21. Naturally left-footed but strong with either foot. A target for numerous Italian clubs.

EVANDER
MIDTJYLLAND

As a club that lives or dies by its "Moneyball" approach to recruiting undervalued players, Danish side Midtjylland pulled off a typical coup when buying this all-purpose Brazilian midfielder from Vasco da Gama for just €2.4 million back in 2019.

Tammy ABRAHAM
ROMA

The Europa Conference League may not be as glamorous as the Champions League, which Abraham won last term, but at least the rangy England striker is playing regularly in the Italian capital. The competition's top scorer so far, and among Serie A's most clinical finishers.

Top scorer...Tammy Abraham finds the net in the group stage

JOTA
CELTIC

Unsurprisingly for an individual of his innate quality, the Portuguese winger has been a key man for the Parkhead club since joining on loan from Benfica in August. One of the best players in Scotland in the first half of 2021-22.

Ricardo GOMES
PARTIZAN BELGRADE

Well-travelled Cape Verde forward who has proved a goalscoring sensation since returning to Partizan last summer, having left to join UAE club Sharjah FC in 2019. Made his name in Portuguese football, but has been prolific for the Serbians.

Marco GRULL
RAPID VIENNA

The 23-year-old winger makes things happen in the final third and is renowned for his strong work ethic and exuberance. A new face in the full Austrian squad, he is one of those rare players not to have graduated from a pro academy.

Jeremy DOKU
RENNES

Big things were expected of Doku after some eye-catching sub appearances at Euro 2020, but injuries restricted him to just two league starts before Christmas, and one in the Conference League. He will be hoping to make up for lost time.

Tricky winger... Jeremy Doku

Lois OPENDA
VITESSE

On loan in Arnhem from Club Brugge, the Belgium U21 striker has been on fire this season in the Eredivisie, notching 11 goals in 20 games by February. Strange that Club Brugge seem to have so little faith in him. A mere €3 million price-tag makes him a very attractive proposition.

Owen WIJNDAL
AZ

The 22-year-old declared himself the "best left-back in the Netherlands" last year. Frank de Boer disagreed, restricting him to two sub appearances at Euro 2020, while Louis van Gaal seems to prefer Daley Blind. He has a point to prove.

A DIFFERENT BALL GAME

How football's transfer market is becoming more like the NBA

Words: Ryan Baldi

In 2010, NBA icon LeBron James decided to run down his contract with the Cleveland Cavaliers. In doing so, he created an open market for basketball's best player and one of the world's most marketable sportsmen.

Just over a decade later, football experienced a similarly seismic situation, when one of its biggest stars became available as a free agent. Not only did Lionel Messi's departure from Barcelona leave the club heartbroken, they also did not receive a cent from Paris Saint-Germain.

Granted, there were extenuating circumstances involved in that particular case, with the Spanish giants' finances in disarray. Yet for the second year in a row, this summer's biggest moves may not involve any transfer fees at all: World Cup winners Kylian Mbappe and Paul Pogba, and Juventus' gifted forward Paulo Dybala top a star-studded list of soon-to-be free agents. Football's transfer market, it seems, is changing.

Out-of-contract players moving clubs for no transfer fee is not a new phenomenon: the landmark legal victory of Belgian player Jean-Marc Bosman has allowed footballers the freedom to choose their next move at the expiry of their contracts since the mid-1990s. Yet players now seem increasingly keen to take charge of their futures.

This summer is not exceptional. Next year, as things stand, there will be even more high-profile unattached stars, with the contracts of Messi (again), Cristiano Ronaldo, Mohamed Salah, Robert Lewandowski and Karim Benzema all set to expire in the summer of 2023. On top of those household names, there's also a swathe of players on expiring deals this season that would ordinarily fetch significant fees for their clubs.

So what is driving this rise in profile and prevalence of football's free agents? The answer, it seems, is twofold.

In the last summer window before the advent of COVID-19, 36 per cent of all transfers within Europe's five major leagues included a fee. Bosman deals accounted for just 19 per cent of the total moves, with loans making up the remainder. In the summer of 2021, fee-paying transfers dropped to just 30 per cent of the deals done, with free transfers rising to 21 per cent.

"There aren't that many mid-range transfers going on," says Colin Gordon, a former player, manager, club chairman and experienced agent. "It's either £100m or nothing. Because of the pandemic, there hasn't been the money around for people to go and spend the £15m and £20m."

"The football industry is stark-raving mad," adds another agent, "and everybody is trying to put method in the madness. The difference is what the pandemic has created. The financial consequences of the pandemic have created havoc for businesses worldwide, and football is no different.

"Football was always overheated. Pre-pandemic, it was a gravy train. But nobody knew that it was going to be a pandemic that would destabilise it. And nobody – governments included – had a plan for a pandemic. The clubs are now taking the position of: 'everything has changed; we can't pay you that now.'"

The other factor driving the bloating of the free-agency market has been a reality of the modern game since long before the pandemic hit: player empowerment.

"The bigger players now have enough money to sit on their contracts and not worry about whether they'll pick up an injury, and they're being braver," Gordon explains. "It's giving them choice."

"I think players just want more control over their futures now, especially with what is happening with the pandemic," says another intermediary. "They know it's a short career. You can lose time. I think that's it. A lot of players, if they could be in a free-agency status, they would. Life is about trends. This is a different time with a different generation."

And like many cultural trends in Europe, the origins of this free-

Game changer... NBA superstar LeBron James

Seismic move... Lionel Messi after completing his free transfer to Paris Saint-Germain last summer

agency boom appear to be traceable to the other side of the Atlantic.

"It's come from there [US sports]," says Gordon, who previously co-founded the Key Sports agency in the late-1990s and has worked with the likes of Theo Walcott, David James and former England manager Steve McClaren. "In basketball and the NFL, the big deals are the free-agency deals. The upside is on free agency. It's going to change the behaviour now of bigger players and players who hold a decent value."

LeBron James' approach was undoubtedly a game-changer for the NBA transfer market. Not only did he create a bidding war for his services by running down his contract, he made his intentions quite clear, starring in a TV special – *The Decision* – in which he announced that the Miami Heat were the winners of the superstar sweepstakes.

James guided the Heat to two championships in four seasons, after which he again entered free agency, electing to return to the Cavaliers. Then, in 2018, came the third free-agency move of his career, joining the Los Angeles Lakers.

Although almost all have lacked a global profile to match James', many NBA stars have since followed his lead, circumventing the club-controlled trade system by running down their deals and claiming autonomy over their careers.

> "The football industry is stark-raving mad"

The same now appears to be happening in the world of football.

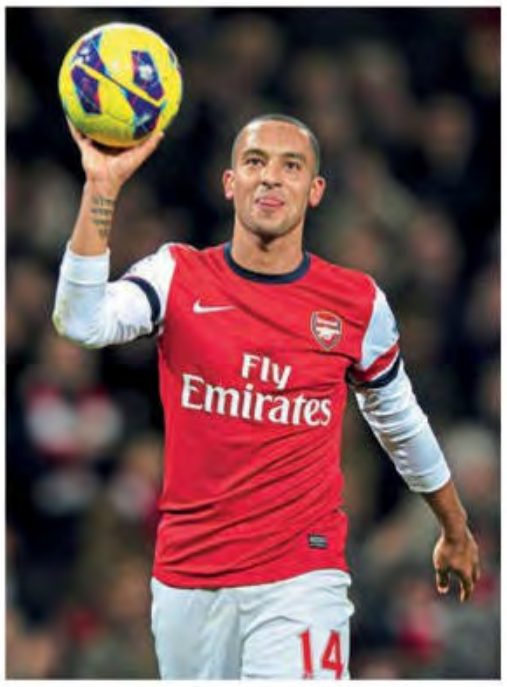
"LeBron influenced this whole landscape of having more control over your contract and your destination," says Francois Nyam, a registered NBA agent who previously represented Philadelphia 76ers superstar Joel Embiid. "In the NBA, there is definitely a trend over the last ten years of short-term contracts. The players have more control.

"But more control is a double-edged sword. You have more control as long as you perform. You perform well, you always control your destiny."

Therein lies the risk for any player eyeing the freedom that awaits at the end of their contract: a loss of form – or, worse, picking up a serious injury – in the dwindling months of their current deal could see what otherwise would have been a smorgasbord of offers and interest shrink instantly.

"There's always that risk that you could get injured," Gordon says, "When Theo [Walcott] went into the final year of his contract [in 2012-13], we said: 'Theo, look, this is a big risk.' He said: 'No, I'm confident, I'm comfortable. I can cope.' And he played the best football of his career. He scored 20 goals that season. He was absolutely amazing. We ended up signing a new deal at Arsenal around the Christmas time, with six months left [on his contract]. But he

Negotiating... Salah's current Liverpool deal expires in 2023



Peak years...Theo Walcott in the 2012-13 season

wasn't trying to hold a gun to Arsenal's head. It was just: 'They're looking at me. I'm looking at them. Let's see how I perform.' And he performed brilliantly. It was his best season.

"Some players can cope with the pressure. Some players think: 'Oh my God.' It might alter their behaviour on the pitch. They might not go in for that tackle. They're not going to make that lung-busting run. It's down to the character."

There is a creeping, under-the-radar outside influence seeking to mitigate this risk for profit, though.

From the funding of multimillion-pound transfers to the purchase of entire clubs, hedge funds and private-equity firms have long since identified football as a means of quick capital gains. Now, hedge funds, primarily based in the United States, have begun to target individual players with expiring contracts, offering incentives and assurances to encourage them to enter the free-agency market.

"There are a lot of funds out there starting to look at funding players to see out their contracts," one agent, who preferred to remain anonymous, told *World Soccer*. "Because there's a risk that a player might get injured, people are putting an assurance around that risk, but also then advancing some fees and saying: 'We'll loan you the money, but we want it paid back with interest – good interest – when you take up the option.'

"It guarantees the player then has choice, because if the club is pricing the player out of the market when they're under contract, and they want £100m, there will only be two or three clubs that can pay that. He hasn't got control if he's under contract. The club will determine where they sell him.

"I think it's going to become more and more prevalent. The fund say: 'You'll have your own choice at the end of it, but it's going to cost you ten per cent.' The players and the agents are the winners."

From a club's perspective, free transfers are anything but free. The fact such deals require no transfer fee is reflected in augmented player salaries, signing bonuses and the compensation demanded by agents.

But as players seek ever-greater autonomy over their sporting destinies, and with such stark financial upsides, it's easy to see why many now consider free agency the future.

"Players' salaries and agents' fees are going to absolutely sky-rocket," Gordon predicts. "No one thought they could get any bigger than they are, but they will."

UP FOR GRABS

Players out of contract in 2022

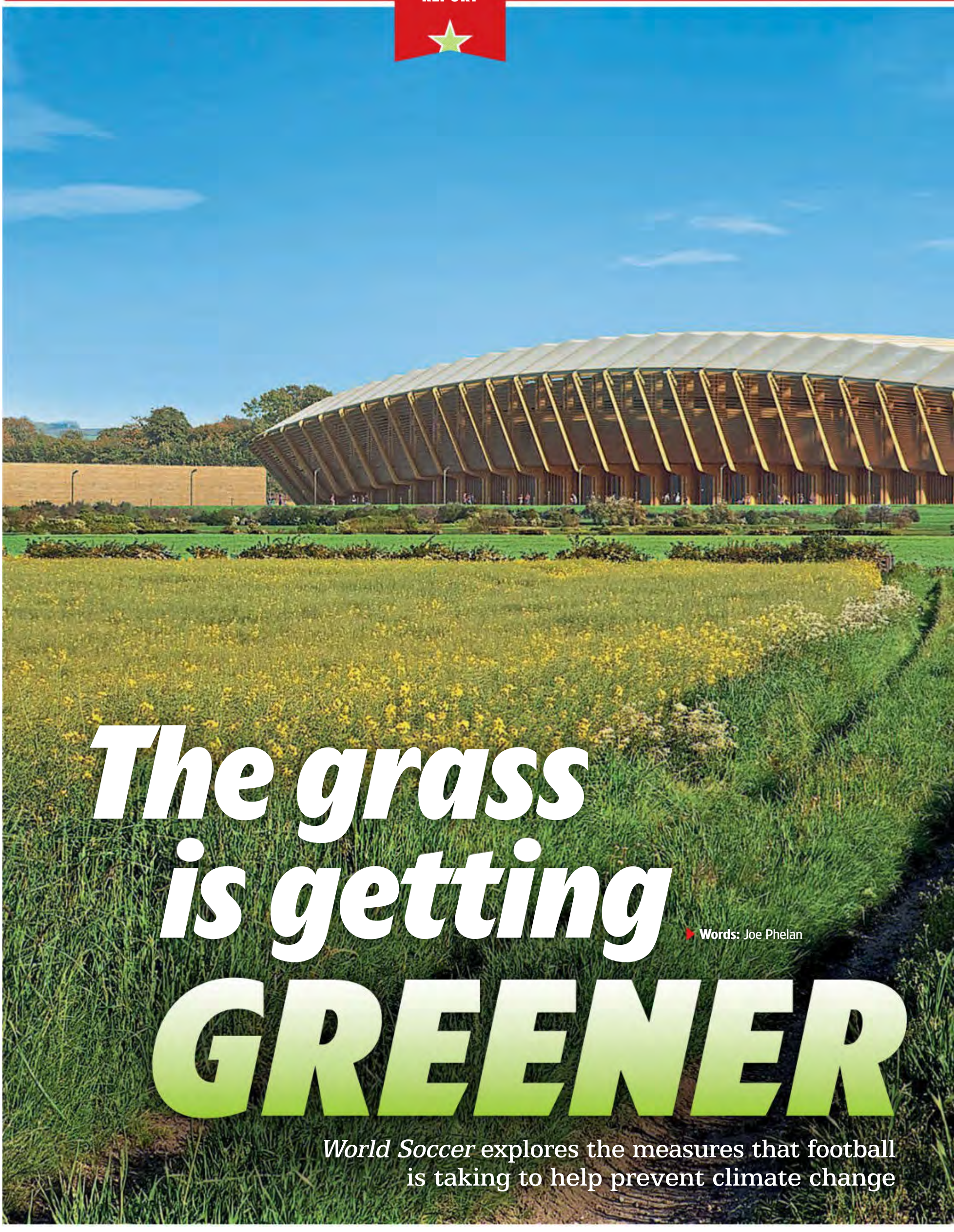
Andrea **BELOTTI** *(Torino)*
Federico **BERNARDESCHI** *(Juventus)*
Andreas **CHRISTENSEN** *(Chelsea)*
Juan **CUADRADO** *(Juventus)*
Ousmane **DEMBELE** *(Barcelona)*
Angel **DI MARIA** *(Paris Saint-Germain)*
Paulo **DYBALA** *(Juventus)*
ISCO *(Real Madrid)*
Boubacar **KAMARA** *(Marseille)*
Franck **KESSIE** *(Milan)*
Alexandre **LACAZETTE** *(Arsenal)*
Jesse **LINGARD** *(Manchester United)*
Kylian **MBAPPE** *(Paris Saint-Germain)*
Luka **MODRIC** *(Real Madrid)*
Andre **ONANA** *(Ajax)*
Paul **POGBA** *(Manchester United)*
Antonio **RUDIGER** *(Chelsea)*
Luis **SUAREZ** *(Atletico Madrid)*
Niklas **SULE** *(Bayern Munich)*
Corentin **TOLISSO** *(Bayern Munich)*

Players out of contract in 2023

Houssem **AOUAR** *(Lyon)*
Marco **ASENSIO** *(Real Madrid)*
Karim **BENZEMA** *(Real Madrid)*
Memphis **DEPAY** *(Barcelona)*
Roberto **FIRMINO** *(Liverpool)*
GAVI *(Barcelona)*
Serge **GNABRY** *(Bayern Munich)*
Ryan **GRAVENBERCH** *(Ajax)*
Ilkay **GUNDOGAN** *(Manchester City)*
Gabriel **JESUS** *(Manchester City)*
JORGINHO *(Chelsea)*
N'Golo **KANTE** *(Chelsea)*
Kalidou **KOULIBALY** *(Napoli)*
Robert **LEWANDOWSKI** *(Bayern Munich)*
Riyad **MAHREZ** *(Manchester City)*
Sadio **MANE** *(Liverpool)*
Lionel **MESSI** *(Paris Saint-Germain)*
Jan **OBLAK** *(Atletico Madrid)*
Cristiano **RONALDO** *(Manchester United)*
Fabian **RUIZ** *(Napoli)*
Mohamed **SALAH** *(Liverpool)*
Milan **SKRINIAR** *(Internazionale)*
Raheem **STERLING** *(Manchester City)*
Marcus **THURAM** *(Borussia Monchengladbach)*
Youri **TIELEMANS** *(Leicester City)*

Out of contract players sourced from www.transfermarkt.co.uk

SPECIAL REPORT



The grass is getting GREENER

Words: Joe Phelan

World Soccer explores the measures that football is taking to help prevent climate change

Green future...plans for Forest Green Rovers' future stadium
zaha-hadid.com

Whether it be Marcus Rashford's campaign to change government policy on free school meals; the all-white kit that Arsenal recently wore as part of an initiative against youth violence and knife crime in London; or the Premier League's Rainbow Laces campaign, football clubs and players have proven they are often prepared to raise their heads above the parapets to highlight important issues.

Recently, it has been the turn of environmentalism to take centre stage. At the beginning of December 2021, Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea played in the world's very first net-zero carbon emissions match at elite level – an achievement that showcased football's capacity to be green.

While there is plenty more work still to do, eco-friendly initiatives are becoming increasingly central to the way that many clubs operate. Numerous sides have fully embraced a greener approach, keen to not only reduce carbon emissions and become more energy efficient, but also to promote the value and necessity of being more sustainable.

To get a more comprehensive understanding of the green efforts being made within the beautiful game, *World Soccer* spoke to a host of clubs, as well as the organisers of the Qatar 2022 World Cup, to get a better understanding of the associated challenges, benefits and goals.

Union Saint-Gilloise

Observers of the Belgian First Division will be well aware that Union Saint-Gilloise – in their first top-flight season for 48 years – are flying high in the league. But they are also setting standards when it comes to their environmental approach.

"We started out with quick wins; things that would make a big impact that we could change or implement immediately without impacting the fan experience," says Raphaele Moeremans, the club's head of sustainability. "It was always important for the fans to support us in the journey."

Examples of this include the club's introduction of eco-cups to reduce the amount of single-use plastics on match days, switching the stadium to a 100 per cent renewable energy plan, using green products to clean the stadium and facilities, replacing conventional toilet paper with recycled paper, and using soap dispensers made from recycled plastics.

"We want to lead by example," Moeremans explains. "We have an important role to play in promoting environmental responsibility, and we are in a unique position to be able to engage with audiences that may not be reached by messaging otherwise. We believe we have a duty to show that small changes can make a big difference."

Of course, big changes can make an even bigger difference, and the club hasn't shied away when it comes to overhauling out-dated methods and processes. A high-tech hybrid pitch has been installed, which mixes synthetic and real grass, thereby requiring less heating in the winter and less irrigation in the summer. Union have also committed to achieving net-zero emissions by 2040, and have introduced a number of sustainable transport initiatives, such as increasing the number of secured bike parking places and giving fans reduced price public transport tickets.

"We have lots of plans for the future, including carbon neutrality and making our supply chain sustainable and fair," Moeremans adds. "We've had very positive returns on our initiatives so far."

Sustainable...Union's Stade Joseph Marien

Manchester Utd

Tottenham currently top the Premier League's sustainability table, with United tied in second alongside Brighton & Hove Albion and Arsenal.

The Red Devils have recorded 12 consecutive years of reduction in carbon emissions, cut energy usage by 31 per cent since 2008, and became the first UK sports organisation to achieve the Carbon Trust Standard certification for their commitment to carbon reduction.

"We have a zero waste to landfill policy, we recycle around 388 tonnes of waste every year, and convert another 674 tonnes into energy," Kate Lowe, Manchester United's Manager of Communications, tells *World Soccer*. "We've also replaced plastic bags with paper bags in our Megastore, which equates to a reduction of 180,000 plastic bags being used every year."

The club also has a Sustainable Procurement Policy that identifies and ultimately favours suppliers deemed to be environmentally responsible. The club also works closely with Renewable Energy Group, a company that produces eco-friendly, bio-based fuels that minimise carbon emissions.

Borussia Dortmund

Borussia Dortmund are making huge waves in terms of their sustainability efforts.

Like fellow Germans Wolfsburg (opposite), one of their key goals is to reduce their carbon output, including emissions generated by individuals travelling to and from the stadium. One of the club's key initiatives is to provide all-season ticket holders with free train travel throughout all of North Rhine-Westphalia. In terms of distance, an equivalent offer would allow a Chelsea season ticket holder living in Manchester to get to London for free.

"In the short term, we want to develop smart targets for each area of work," explains Xi Wang, Borussia Dortmund's internal communications manager. "This includes climate neutrality, which we must achieve in the longer term. We have completed an energy consumption analysis and are using this to develop measures for the energy modernisation of our properties. With our foundation we were also able to start our first ecological education project.

"Sustainability is the cornerstone of our future – not only in football," Xi adds.

Forest Green Rovers

No article about environmentalism in football would be complete without the League Two side, who are Green by name and green by nature.

The club, whose chairman Dale Vince is often described as an "eco-industrialist", is widely regarded as the greenest on the planet. In 2018 the UN declared FGR to be the world's first carbon-neutral football club, praising its vast array of sustainable initiatives and practices, from the installation of solar panels to the banning of meat products at the stadium.

The club is determined to make environmental statements wherever it can, and has an "organic" pitch that is completely free from chemical pesticides, provides EV charging for visitors, and in 2021 played in a kit made from discarded coffee grounds and recycled plastic.

The club's owners are also incredibly tech-savvy, introducing a solar-powered robot to cut its grass, going some way to showcasing the club's pioneering spirit. The EFL has also given the thumbs up to "Eco Park", a proposed 5,000-capacity arena that would see FGR's home games take place at the world's greenest stadium.

Eco Park...FGR's projected new home
zaha-hadid.com

Countdown... Race to Zero

Wolfsburg

The German side's kit, badge and stadium are all green, so it should come as no surprise that environmentalism is a core part of the club's personality.

Wolfsburg were the first Bundesliga side to use only LED floodlights, use recycled paper and sustainable office supplies, and have used 100 per cent green electricity since 2011. In recent months, the club's e-charging infrastructure has been expanded, allowing both players and employees to charge all-electric Volkswagen cars on site.

The club's determination to showcase their focus on sustainability has resulted in the installation of a "Race to Zero" countdown clock in the stadium, which is ticking down to 2025, when the club plans to achieve net zero emissions. "This draws the attention of fans, partners and sponsors to our race," explains Nico Briskorn, Wolfsburg's director of corporate social responsibility.

Yet the majority of Wolfburg's associated carbon footprint comes from fan mobility. Briskorn admits that, while the club "can't dictate to spectators how they should travel to and from games", it does bear "a share of the responsibility" for the emissions generated in the process. As a result, Wolfsburg are trying to encourage fans to choose environmentally friendly transportation. Currently, a ticket to a women's or Under-23s' match doubles up as a free pass on public transport, with a "climate-neutral ticket" soon to be introduced for the men's team.

"Clubs in the top leagues have the necessary resources to lead the way in a sustainable form of soccer operations," Briskorn says. "Club leaders should therefore recognise and seize the opportunity for green, transformative soccer."

Qatar 2022

Qatar's bid for the World Cup has been beset by criticism ever since it was launched. While significant questions remain over the death of migrant workers in building the stadia, organisers have been robust in response to concerns over the tournament's environmental impact.

"Sustainability is at the heart of the FIFA World Cup 2022," Abdulrahman Al Muftah, sustainability and environment specialist for the supreme committee for delivery and legacy, tells *World Soccer*.

Qatar's eight new stadiums, the 40+ training sites and its enhanced national transport network – including the new Doha Metro – have all been built according to robust green building standards.

"Our vision of a carbon-neutral World Cup will be achieved by measuring, mitigating and offsetting all greenhouse gas emissions associated with the tournament since winning the bid in 2010," Al Muftah explains. "That includes infrastructure associated with the tournament's operations, such as emissions from fan travel, accommodation, and food and beverage operations.

"In doing so, we will catalyse low-carbon solutions in Qatar and the region, and drive growth in the low-carbon economy. It is our hope that the 2022 World Cup will set new benchmarks and help change the way future World Cups and other sporting events are planned, developed and delivered."

Sustainability In Numbers

90% *Of football fans are in favour of protecting the environment, fighting global warming and reducing pollution*

86% *Of fans believe the football industry should be committed to environmental protection, and say they would be "more satisfied" if games were environmentally friendly*

69% *Of fans aged 16-24 want to see clubs do more to help the community, improve inequality, or act sustainably*

61% *Transportation accounts for 61 per cent of Premier League clubs' carbon footprint*

48% *Of fans don't believe that altering their own behaviour would "change anything"*

Qatar 2022...Al Thumama Stadium

STEPHEN O'DONNELL

"Every Irish club wants to qualify for Europe and we are no different"

New Dundalk manager Stephen O'Donnell talks about his playing and managerial career, and looks ahead to the new League of Ireland season

As a youngster you grew up in Galway in the West of Ireland, so how did you come to the attention of Arsenal as a youth player?
I played Gaelic football when I was young and of course I also played soccer for my local club, Newcastle. We have an annual competition in Ireland called the Kennedy Cup where all the top schoolboy teams play. I must have impressed Arsenal's Liam Brady, who was saw me play.

How did you get on at Highbury?
To be honest I didn't make the grade. Patrick Cregg, who joined Arsenal around the same time and is now my assistant at Dundalk, made three League Cup appearances, but I never made the first team. [Shamrock Rovers manager] Stephen Bradley was also there at that time and Graham Barrett, who now works as an agent. The Irish lads all lived together.

All the Arsenal players were very welcoming. Philippe Senderos and Cesc Fabregas moved into our former house and Fabregas was our postman – he used to deliver letters from Ireland to our new address! Martin Keown, who has relations in Galway, was always very friendly as was Sol Campbell.

Was scoring a late penalty for Shamrock Rovers away to Partizan Belgrade in 2011 the highlight of your playing career?
I had come on as sub in extra-time and Gary Twigg, who would have been Rovers' regular penalty taker was off the pitch at that stage. I just felt confident. It was a really important kick as it meant Rovers became the first Irish club to reach the group stage of the Europa League.

As a player you won six league titles with three different clubs: Bohemians, Shamrock Rovers and Dundalk. Which one gave you the most enjoyment?
No doubt it was in 2014 with Dundalk. I came back from injury and we beat Cork City at Oriel Park on the last day of the season. Cork only needed a draw to win the league, but I scored one of the goals in a 2-0 win. It was Dundalk's first title since 1995 and the start of a great run by the club domestically and in Europe.

You retired from playing in 2018 and got your first job at St Patrick's Athletic midway through the 2019 season.
Yes, I replaced Harry Kenny and I was in charge for the last seven games of the season. We finished fifth that campaign, and then in 2020, which was a truncated season due to COVID, we finished sixth. Last season we finished second to Shamrock Rovers and beat Bohemians in the FAI Cup final.

St Patrick's Athletic were annoyed when you announced that you were joining Dundalk three days after winning the FAI Cup final.
I will be forever grateful to St Pat's for giving me a chance in 2019. I was only 33 and just finished playing and was grateful to get the opportunity to manage in the Premier Division. But I feel I have repaid that in regards to St Patrick's Athletic. They are in Europe this season and won the cup for only the fourth time in their history. The effort and my work ethic when I was with St Pat's cannot be argued against. I gave everything I possibly could to the football club while I was there. Loyalty is what you put in. What my assistant Patrick Cregg and I put in when we were with St Pat's was 120 per cent effort. The remit when we came in was to make St Pat's competitive again and we couldn't have given any more of ourselves to do that.

You have also taken a few players from St Pat's with you.
Yes, I was able to bring in Sam Bone, John Mountney and Robbie Benson, who scored the matching-winning penalty in the FAI Cup final shootout against Bohemians. I have also got John Martin from Waterford, Paul Doyle from UCD and Keith Ward from Bohemians. Hopefully we will sign a few more before the season starts on February 18.

Dundalk are not in Europe for first time since 2013. Do you think that will help you build a team than can challenge for the league title?

Every Irish club wants to qualify for Europe and we are no different. However, Europe does bring its own headaches with fixtures piling up. We have kept the spine of the club, but obviously there are going to be a lot of changes in personnel at the club this season. I have brought some lads who have won a lot of trophies and some younger players also. Dundalk were the first club from outside of Dublin to win the league and in a provincial town sometimes you get a mindset of "them and us." There is a great history of soccer in the town and obviously the supporters want to sample success again.

How can clubs attract more supporters to attend League of Ireland games?
I think it's all down to promotion. Facilities need to be improved, but we need to promote our games more. Look at the FAI Cup final when we got 36,000 with marketing and attractive pricing. Traditionally Irish soccer fans have been obsessed with the Premier League, but I think Irish supporters are gradually accepting that the standards in Ireland are improving all the time.

Who will win the Premier Division and where do you hope Dundalk will finish this season?
Shamrock Rovers are bidding for three in a row and it's going to be hard to stop them. They have retained all of their squad from last season and Jack Byrne is back with the club after a spell with APOEL Nicosia. Derry City took a few players from Dundalk before I arrived and I expect them to be strong. St Patrick's have signed Eoin Doyle from Bolton and he is a proven goalscorer. Bohemians will have a young team and it will be interesting to see how Damien Duff gets on in his first season with newly-promoted Shelbourne.

Dundalk had a traumatic time in 2021; they had three different managers and then Peak6 sold the club to a local group late in the year. I think this year it will be a case of resetting and building a new team.

Dundalk have brought in Dave Mackey as first-team manager as you don't yet have the necessary UEFA coaching badges. Are you hoping to get the UEFA Pro licence this year?
Yes, I plan to get that sorted. At St Pat's I worked with Alan Matthews, who had the Pro licence. In Ireland if you miss out on a coaching course you have to wait a while for the next one. But I hope to get on the next course available. But if you look at various clubs in England or around the world, management is a team effort.

Interview by Sean Creedon

IKE UGBO

"Chelsea taught me almost everything that I know"

After rubbing shoulders with some of Europe's finest talents in Chelsea's academy, Ugbo has forged his own unique career path

What was it like coming through the ranks at Chelsea?
When you're younger, you don't really realise how privileged you are. It's only now that I see it. It's definitely one of the best academies. On the pitch, and off the pitch, you can see how much time and effort they put into looking after the academy.

Who else was in your age group?
Trevoh Chalobah, Mason Mount, Eddie Nketiah, who's now at Arsenal. We grew up and went to school together at the academy full time. We just went through the ranks step by step. It's nice to see that everyone's taken different paths – maybe one day we'll all play against each other. Who knows?

You won the FA Youth Cup in 2016 and 2017 alongside the likes of Chalobah, Mount, Reece James, Fikayo Tomori, Tammy Abraham and Callum Hudson-Odoi. What do you remember about those days?
It was a nice experience winning a trophy, of course. Even the opposition we played against, you see what some of the players have done and the moves they've made. Everyone's path can be different. Not everyone's path is just in England.

How does it feel to see what they've gone on to achieve?
When I was at Chelsea, everyone was top. You could see what everyone was capable of so there's no real surprise about what they're doing now. If you're not at Chelsea, you can still be a top player somewhere else. Declan Rice was in my age group as well and now he's at West Ham United.

With so much competition for places, a lot of young Chelsea players end up going out on loan, yourself included. How did you find that experience?
I learned a lot in my first three loan spells [Barnsley, MK Dons and Scunthorpe United]. Even though I didn't achieve much personally, it matured me and shaped me into the player I am today. I was quite young to be in the Championship and then League One, but I think it was for the better. I can see now that I've come a long way from there.

Why didn't those initial loans work out as well as you'd hoped?
When I look back, I was still a boy, playing in the men's game. It took me too long to adapt from Under-23s football to the first team. Eventually it started to click, and I started to change things to get bigger and adapt to the speed of the game. That made a big difference and helped me a lot.

What are the biggest differences that you noticed playing senior football for the first time?
The intensity and the physicality. Even just in training, it's quicker than Under-23s football. You've got to be ready for that and be able to keep going. You're playing twice a week sometimes and you always need to prepare your body for the next game.

Some players go on loan to earn a chance in the first team, whereas others want to put themselves in the shop window. What would you say was the motivation behind your loan moves?
It changed over time. On my first one, I was just trying to get experience. I wanted to play first-team football at 18. I felt like I was ready. I wanted to get that experience of men's football straightaway. When I went to the Netherlands, I just wanted to get myself in the best possible position so, if I wasn't going to be at Chelsea, I could still be somewhere I wanted to be, playing in top competitions.

Did you have any concerns about your ability to adapt or did you feel it was just a matter of time?
Sometimes it creeps in when you're going through it. Especially when I'd come off a good season, scoring loads of goals, and then I only got one or two. It starts to creep in. But I had a lot of self-belief. I thought: "Maybe I need to change something to get back to scoring goals again." That's why I decided to start again in the Netherlands and work my way up to get people talking about me again. ➤

CANADA
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Europa League... Ugbo competes with West Ham's Issa Diop in this season's group stage

FA Youth Cup... Ugbo scores against Manchester City in the 2017 final

Your loan spells in the Netherlands and Belgium – at Roda JC and Cercle Brugge respectively – were much more successful. Why do you think that was?
Before I went on my first loan abroad, I changed a lot of things. I changed my training and my diet. I had to get back to my old ways of scoring goals and being clinical. I realised I wasn't going to get three clear-cut chances a game like when I was at Chelsea. It was important to make sure I was reliable when the ball came into the box. Now I know that I can finish off half-chances or make something out of nothing.

Were you concerned at all about moving abroad for those loan spells?
I was just happy to play. I'd had three loan spells that I felt didn't go well, so I didn't really care where I went. I just needed somewhere I could play, to build a platform and show that I can get goals at first-team level. Obviously, it's tough when there are long spells where you can't go home but, at the end of the day, you're doing what you love and that sometimes justifies it. It's for a better future.

You signed for Genk in August. What appealed to you about joining the club?
They made an approach towards the end of last season. They have a record of developing players who are playing in big competitions, which is where I see myself going in the near future. Players like Christian Benteke, Kevin De Bruyne, Wilfred Ndidi and Leon Bailey. They've developed a lot of young players with similar profiles to me. It shows that they're doing something right and it was a big factor in my decision. It was definitely one of the best clubs to go to.

After spending so long at Chelsea, how did it feel to leave permanently?

Golden generation...Ugbo lifts the 2016 UEFA Youth League trophy with Chalobah, Abraham and Tomori

Parent club...Ugbo celebrating a goal for Genk

What were your first impressions of Genk?
You can see why they're one of the top clubs in the country. There's a lot of quality in training. Playing with top-quality players like that enhances your game so it was definitely the right decision to move there.

How did you found your first few months at the club?
I enjoyed it. Similar to last season, I was pleased to come in and score straightaway. I always feel like the first goal is the hardest one because sometimes it can take a while. I'd been in the league before, so I knew ways to score, but I was in a better team now. To get my first goal in the first ten minutes [the winner against Anderlecht] was unbelievable. It was a good start and it boosts your confidence.

And now you've joined Troyes on loan and made your international debut for Canada. What do you hope to achieve next?
I just want to keep progressing. Since I first started going on loan, I've been gradually taking steps in the right direction. I just want to maintain that and not stall.

Interview by Sean Cole

"Now I know that I can finish off half-chances or make something out of nothing"

It was difficult, but I'd been away for so long. Since 18, I hadn't really spent much time at Chelsea, but they've taught me almost everything that I know, all the foundations that I have.

I had to go away, rather than keep going on loan. I didn't think about Chelsea too much when I was on loan because your team could be in a difficult situation, like we were last year. If you have the mindset that you're going back, I don't think you apply yourself in the same way.

Breakthrough...Ugbo scored 17 goals in all competitions for Cercle Brugge last season

NESTOR EL MAESTRO

"I'm Serbian in my heart, but Britain is my home country"

At the age of 38, Nestor El Maestro's love of coaching has already taken him all over the world

His accent is pure southeast English, but Nestor El Maestro is truly a citizen of the world.

Born in Serbia and raised in West Sussex, he has coached teams across Europe, including in Germany, Austria, Bulgaria and Slovakia, plus a short-lived stint at Saudi Arabia's Al Taawoun. His latest post is head coach at top Turkish club Goztepe, where he was appointed in September, succeeding Unal Karaman.

"At my level, you don't get to choose jobs as much as people may think," the 38-year-old says. "You read about top coaches and how they plan their careers, but I've often taken the best available job.

"I'd finished my stint in Saudi Arabia three days before the call from Goztepe came, so I jumped at the opportunity."

Based in the coastal city of Izmir, Goztepe have spent most of this season mid-table in the Turkish Super Lig, eight years after a disastrous relegation to the third tier.

They were bought by billionaire businessman Mehmet Sepil – an Izmir native best known for founding an energy company which extracts oil in Iraqi Kurdistan – nearly a decade ago and returned to Turkey's top flight in 2016 after a 14-year absence.

But all that is a long way from El Maestro's early years in Belgrade.

Born to Sladjina and Zoran Jevtic, his first footballing memory is of his father taking him to watch Red Star Belgrade. At the age of nine, he was sent to Ardingly College, a boarding school in West Sussex, later spending a year at The King's School, in Canterbury, Kent. His move to Britain came in 1992, but had little to do with him being in danger due to the civil war in the former Yugoslavia.

"The war was never actually on Serbian territory," recalls El Maestro. "But it was a bad time for the country, both socially and economically. My parents could afford it, so they sent me abroad."

His curious surname – which he changed legally once he was in the UK – was down to "idiocy", he admits.

"There have been a lot false reports which state that I am ashamed to be Serbian and, therefore, that I deleted my original surname, Jevtic. That is just not true.

"When I was growing up in England, Slobodan Milosevic was in power in Serbia and he was one of the most famous despots in the world. It wasn't easy for me because the Serbian diaspora in England is not a large community and I didn't know anyone else who was from there, especially in my school, where there were no other Serbians. I felt isolated.

"Serbia is a small but beautiful country, famous for its sportsmen, but in the early 1990s it was more famous for being the home of a dictator. As a teenage kid, I felt uneasy sharing something in common with Milosevic.

"It felt uncomfortable – I'd listen to the BBC in the early 1990s and it would make out that Milosevic was entirely in the wrong, whereas all parties concerned were to blame.

"I thought 'El Maestro' sounded good, kind of like the Brazilian footballers such as Ronaldinho.

"It's the same as when you're 17 or 18 and you think a tattoo of a large dragon on your back is really cool and you don't realise it's going to be forever. I was oblivious to the impact that changing my surname would have on my life and my parents were far from delighted.

"My wife and three children have the ➤

umbro
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El Maestro surname, and my mortgages and insurance policies are in that name, so it would not be so easy to change. I've been 'El Maestro' longer than I have been 'Jevtic' now – it is part of me."

His younger brother, Nikon – who is his assistant coach at Goztepe – also legally changed his surname.

El Maestro's route into management began when he started coaching local Sunday league teams in Haywards Heath, a town in West Sussex.

An early proponent of video analysis, he helped out at West Ham United's academy for a while, before moving to Austria Vienna, where he also coached its youngsters, and then Valencia, in Spain.

"I knew I wanted to make a living in football somehow, so I sent out coaching videos and my CV to anyone I could find an address for at the time," says El Maestro. "West Ham contacted me and said they were interested, so I took a few sessions with the academy kids there for a few months.

"Austria Vienna was my first proper job as a professional coach, and then Valencia was definitely a step up. They are still a big team now, but at the time they were playing regularly in the Champions League. After that, I wanted to become more involved in senior professional football."

His wish was granted ahead of the 2006-07 season when, aged just 23, he joined manager Mirko Slomka's coaching staff at Schalke in Germany. More recently, Julian Nagelsmann and Domenico Tedesco took charge of Bundesliga sides at the ages of 28 and 31, respectively. But, 15 years ago, El Maestro became the league's youngest-ever assistant coach.

At Schalke he coached stellar names such as Hamit Altintop and Kevin Kuranyi, as well as helping to develop future World Cup winners Manuel Neuer and Mesut Ozil.

"Mirko Slomka had taken over from Ralf Rangnick at Schalke and he was looking for a new coaching team," says El Maestro. "I was invited to a meeting at Schalke and I was fortunate that Mirko had a similar footballing background to me in that he had not played professionally.

"I was adept at video analysis, which was a rarity in European football at the time. It led me to becoming Mirko's first-team coach."

After two seasons in Gelsenkirchen, he followed Slomka to Hannover and Hamburg, before returning to Austria Vienna as assistant to former Bayern Munich midfielder Thorsten Fink.

It was in the summer of 2017 that El Maestro branched out on his own when he was appointed head coach at Spartak Trnava. He and his brother led the Slovaks to their first league title since the country gained its independence in 1993.

> "Everything that season was magical and unbelievable – every decision we made seemed to be the right one, from player recruitment to our style of play. We made history"

"We definitely were not expected to win the league," says El Maestro, whose family are based in Vienna. "Everything that season was magical and unbelievable – every decision we made seemed to be the right one, from player recruitment to our style of play. We made history."

The siblings departed the following summer for Bulgarian giants CSKA Sofia, but were sacked after just eight months in charge,

Sturm Graz...El Maestro oversees a Europa League qualifier

Youngest-ever assistant coach...ex-Schalke head coach Mirko Slomka takes training alongside assistants Oliver Reck and El Maestro

while El Maestro's next job – at Sturm Graz, in Austria – lasted a solitary season. The next job, in Al Taawoun, Saudi Arabia, only lasted five months.

Yet El Maestro is philosophical when it comes to the realities of football management. He explains: "Coaches often complain about lack of time, but the short longevity of a coach has two sides. We don't like being fired after, say, a seven-game losing streak, but we are the first to start dreaming about bigger and better things after a seven game-winning streak."

"In Britain, I think we have a slightly skewed perspective because, statistically, coaches in England simply work for longer in their jobs than in other European leagues," El Maestro, who speaks six languages, says. "It is a different approach that I think stems from the decades-old manager model, which is unique to English football.

"In countries like Turkey, Portugal, Russia and Germany, clubs can change coaches very quickly and it is not unusual for a team fighting relegation to have three head coaches during the course of one season."

Goztepe, where El Maestro's fellow countrymen Bojan Stamatovic and Branko Katic are also on the coaching staff, is the biggest club he has coached.

He says: "Turkey is a very emotional place, and there is a lot of fan and media pressure, which is great when things are going well. A coach at my level has to come to terms with that.

"I have managed five clubs in five different countries with varied levels of success but, overall, each job I have had has been bigger than the previous one. Turkey is serious about its football – there are big teams, big players and huge stadiums here."

No manager's job can be considered safe in Turkey and, although he is happy where he is for now, returning one day to England as a head coach is one of his dreams.

"England is the land of football. It is the ambition of any football coach to manage there, regardless of their nationality and whether they have a connection to England or not.

"I consider Vienna my hometown, I am Serbian in my heart and I consider Britain to be my home country – I miss it."

Interview by Simon Yaffe

Glenn Moore

China are champions of Asia

The Steel Roses seal a record ninth victory in the Women's Asian Cup

Champions...China's players celebrate with their trophy

The Women's Asian Cup, which was hosted by India and dramatically won by China, highlighted the progress being made by the region's middle powers and a re-ordering of the elite.

China came from 2-0 down to beat South Korea 3-2 with a stoppage-time winner, the Steel Roses' ninth success but their first since 2006. Their opponents, while World Cup regulars, were making their debut in the final.

The last two finals had both been 1-0 victories for Japan over Australia, but the *Nadeshiko* lost to China in the semi-final while the Matildas failed to even make the last four for the first time since entering the event in 2006.

> The last two finals had both been 1-0 wins for Japan over Australia, but the *Nadeshiko* lost to China in the semi-final while the Matildas failed to even make the last four

With Australia co-hosting the 2023 World Cup, that prompted much consternation and debate over Tony Gustavsson's position as coach. Further fuel was provided by the fact that the Philippines, managed by ex-Australia coach Alen Stajcic, reached the semi-finals for the first time.

That earned Philippines – whose team drew heavily on the diaspora, with the bulk of the squad US-born and trained – a debut at next year's World Cup. All four semi-finalists booked a place along with Vietnam, who took Asia's last automatic spot to make their own finals bow. Thailand – who were at the 2019 finals – and Chinese Taipei will go into the inter-confederation play-offs.

The competition was hosted in a bio-bubble with no fans allowed and teams kept in closed environments. Unfortunately for hosts India that did not prevent a large COVID outbreak within their camp forcing them to withdraw after one match.

This was a huge disappointment for the Indian team who harboured hopes of reaching the knockout stages after a promising display in their opening game against Iran, albeit in a goalless draw.

India had hired Thomas Dennerby, who had previously coached his native Sweden to the 2011 Women's World Cup semi-finals and Nigeria to Africa Women's Cup of Nations success, to prepare the Blue Tigresses for their first appearance at the finals since 2003.

The expansion to 12 teams made for the largest competition since 2003, when there were 14 entrants. The five subsequent tournaments had each featured just eight teams.

Before the contraction scorelines were damaging the game's image. In 2003 six different teams had been drubbed, by each of 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 goals. Two years prior North Korea had thrashed Guam 24-0.

Reduced fields meant far fewer mismatches. In the last three tournaments there had only been one score higher than 8-0, South Korea's 12-0 despatch of Myanmar in 2014.

Surprise package ...the Philippines

With the women's game growing in profile and investment, the AFC risked expansion. The gamble looked to have backfired when, in the fourth game, Australia put 18 past Indonesia, who were making their first appearance since 1989. Sam Kerr took full advantage, scoring five to pass Tim Cahill as the nation's leading scorer of either gender.

However, that proved to be an outlier. The next highest score was 7-0 by China against Iran and, in the quarter-finals, Japan over the disappointing Thai team.

India's withdrawal left China, Chinese Taipei and Iran in Group A. Iran were making their debut. Women's football was banned after the Islamic revolution of 1979, but kept alive through futsal, which was grudgingly tolerated. In 2005 football was finally permitted, and a national team formed, but progress was stymied by FIFA's refusal to allow players to wear the hijab (which was insisted upon, along with arm and leg covering, by the Iranian government).

FIFA lifted the ban in 2014 and, after some success at age-group levels, the national side beat Jordan on penalties to reach India. However, they were understandably weak and comfortably beaten by China and Chinese Taipei.

Australia, with a squad largely drawn from European teams, notably England's WSL, waltzed through Group B racking up 24 goals. But there was criticism of Gustavsson's selection policies with Kerr, for example, starting the Indonesia rout then having to come off the bench to win the Thailand match.

In between, the Philippines held out for 50 minutes before Kerr inevitably broke the deadlock.

Having unexpectedly defeated

Thailand 1-0, Philippines came second in the group, much to the credit of Stajcic, who was controversially fired by Australia before the 2019 World Cup.

Group C was quickly sewn up by Japan and South Korea, both beating Myanmar and Vietnam. Japan took the group on goal difference after a draw between the pair. Myanmar and Vietnam also drew enabling the latter to reach the last eight as one of the best third-placed sides (along with Thailand) despite only gaining one point in three games.

In the top half of the knockout-round draw, China and Japan easily dispatched Vietnam and Thailand before contesting a gripping semi-final. Japan led in both normal time and extra-time but Wang Shanshan's 119th-minute goal forced penalties, which China won 4-3.

In an uneven bottom half South Korea stunned Australia with a superb late winner from Chelsea's Ji So-yun. Amid the criticism of Gustavsson it was somewhat overlooked that Kerr had uncharacteristically missed a sitter at 0-0. If that had gone in Australia would likely have made the final, at least.

The other quarter-final went to penalties. Californian born-and-bred

Early exit...hosts India take on Iran in their only match of the tournament

Filipino keeper Olivia Davies-McDaniel was the match winner, saving three anxiety-ridden Chinese Taipei penalties and scoring one herself. She performed well in the semi-final too but was beaten twice as South Korea eased to victory.

In the final the Taegeuk Ladies – coached by Englishman Colin Bell, who won the Champions League with Frankfurt in 2015 – went 2-0 up by half-time. Choe Yu-ri and, from the spot, Ji, scored – the latter's fifth of the tournament.

A first triumph seemed likely but Tottenham Hotspur loanee Tang Jiali, the only squad member playing outside China, halved the deficit with a penalty on 68 minutes. Four minutes later Zhang Linyan levelled.

The trophy's destination was decided in a frantic few minutes of injury-time. After Zhou Yu made a stunning one-handed save from Son Hwa-yeon's 91st-minute volley, Xiao Yuyi converted Wang Shanshan's pass to restore China to the regional pinnacle.

Record breaker... Sam Kerr

Round-up

Criticised...the FIFPro Women's World XI

PUTELLAS TREBLE

Barcelona's Alexia Putellas added to her *World Soccer* Women's World Player of the Year award by winning both the FIFA Best crown and the Ballon d'Or Feminin. In each case Barcelona and Spain team-mate Jennifer Hermoso and Sam Kerr, of Chelsea and Australia, made up the top three. Bizarrely none of the trio were voted into a very strange FIFPro World XI. Emma Hayes (Chelsea) was voted FIFA Best Coach of the Year.

PLAYERS WIN BENEFITS IN UNITED STATES AND ENGLAND

After lengthy negotiations and a strike threat, NWSL players agreed their first collective bargaining agreement with the league. The deal mandates an increase in the minimum salary from $22,000 (£16,000) to $35,000 (£25,000), plus revenue sharing, eight weeks paid parental leave, up to six months mental health leave, free agency (free transfers) for long service, and a raft of other improvements.

Players in England's WSL and second-tier Championship also won new benefits including 14 weeks maternity pay and improved long-term illness and injury cover.

DAUGHTERS MAKE A NAME FOR THEMSELVES

After a stellar rookie season 19-year-old Trinity Rodman – daughter of basketball legend Dennis – has been made the highest-paid player in NWSL history, after Washington Spirit offered her a four-year deal worth a reported $281,000 per year.

Meanwhile, in the Women's FA Cup, Karna Solskjaer – daughter of recently

Record breaker... Trinity Rodman

departed men's boss Ole Gunnar – made her debut for Manchester United. Earlier that day Kenzie Weir followed in her father David's footsteps by playing for Everton.

VASSEUR FIRED BY BLUES

Jean-Luc Vasseur, who led Lyon to Champions League success, was axed by Everton after just ten matches. The team won one and lost three of seven WSL matches under the Frenchman.

SWEDES ON THE MOVE

Two Swedish strikers were on the move in the transfer window. Stina Blackstenius left Hacken for Arsenal while Sofia Jakobsson moved from Bayern Munich to San Diego Wave. The NWSL newcomers also recruited England goalkeeper Carly Telford and Australia's Emily van Egmond.

Germany's Sara Doorsoun went from Wolfsburg to Eintract Frankfurt while veteran forward Veronica Boquete joined Fiorentina from Milan.

Lyon's Champions League bid was boosted with the signing of Lindsay Horan from Portland Thorns plus the return from loans at US off-shoot OL Reign of Dzsenifer Marozsan, Sarah Bouhaddi and Eugenie Le Sommer.

Sacked...ex-Everton boss Jean-Luc Vasseur

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The month in numbers

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4
Portuguese League Cups won by Sporting after they defeated Lisbon arch-rivals Benfica in the final in January to lift the trophy for the second year in a row.

94:52
Minutes on the clock when Tottenham were losing to Leicester City – the latest that a team has been behind before going on to win a Premier League match.

£20m
Reported price paid by Turkish businessman Acun Ilicali for Championship club Hull City.

Long-range strike...Angel Correa

0.01
XG rating of Angel Correa's phenomenal halfway-line goal for Atletico Madrid against Villarreal in January.

3
Games in a row that Fulham scored six or more goals – the first English second-tier side to do so since Everton way back in February 1954.

2
Red cards rescinded by VAR for Brazil goalkeeper Alisson during the World Cup qualifying match with Ecuador in Quito, which finished in a 1-1 draw.

Record breaker...Luis Suarez scores from the spot in World Cup qualifying

28
World Cup qualifying goals scored by Uruguay's Luis Suarez, overtaking Lionel Messi's all-time record.

2
Fourth-tier sides in the last eight of the Coupe de France, with Bergerac and Versailles meeting each other in the quarter-finals.

94%
Farhad Moshiri's ownership in Everton after the billionaire increased his stake in the Premier League club.

$4.86bn
Global transfer spending in 2021, according to an official FIFA report.

2
Transfer windows that Marseille may be unable to sign players for, in the wake of their controversial signing of midfielder Pape Gueye.

1
Number of champions from Europe's top eight leagues to make a profit during the 2020-21 season: Germany's Bayern Munich.

3
Juventus goals scored inside seven minutes as the Turin giants came from 3-1 down to beat Roma 4-3 at the Stadio Olimpico.

20
Minutes the Premier League game between Brentford and Wolves was suspended for after a drone was spotted flying above the Brentford Community Stadium.

32
Years since Borussia Dortmund were last defeated by St Pauli, after the second-tier outfit dumped the German Cup holders out of the competition.

12
Spanish Super Cups won by Real Madrid, one short of Barcelona's all-time record, after they lifted the trophy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

1
Nigeria striker Uchenna Kanu became the first foreign player to score a hat-trick in Liga MX Femenil after hitting a treble for Tigres against Atlas.

56
International goals scored by Sam Kerr after bagging seven in four games at the Women's Asian Cup, taking her past Tim Cahill (50) as Australia's leading international goalscorer.

Australian legend...Kerr

35
International games Algeria went undefeated before their shock 1-0 loss to Equatorial Guinea at the Africa Cup of Nations – just two short of Italy's world record.

Match winner...Karim Benzema celebrates netting against Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup

Mayotte

STEVE MENARY

Half the world away

Clubs from the small Indian Ocean Island continue to make a name for themselves in the French Cup

Thrashed...Jumeaux de M'zouazia were outclassed by Ligue 1 giants Bordeaux

Jumeaux de M'zouazia's run to the last 64 of the French Cup ended with a 10-0 thrashing from Bordeaux, but the club's run still represented progress for the Mayotte league.

For the second season in a row, a club from the island in the Indian Ocean reached that stage of the Coupe de France following FC Mtsapere's performance in 2020-21.

Mayotte's only affiliation is to the French federation, and the Coupe de France is the only regular outlet for the 126 clubs, which play across four leagues. FC Mtsapere won the last league title and AS Twins won the cup, meaning the pair will be entered into the 2022-23 Coupe de France.

FC Mtsapere, AS Jumeaux and AS Sada are the best-supported clubs but all players are amateurs. Mayotte does have a representative team, which is managed by Mtsapere boss Massoundi Abidi, but opportunities to play are rare.

Most other French overseas territories have some form of affiliation to a regional confederation. Even Mayotte's neighbours Reunion are associate members of the Confederation of African Football (CAF), which enables their clubs to enter regional competitions.

> For the second season in a row, a club from the island in the Indian Ocean reached the last 64 of the Coupe de France

Between 2008 and 2012, the French federation ran a biennial tournament for representative teams from overseas territories, the Coupe de l'Outre Mer. Only locally-based players could take part and Mayotte finished fourth in 2010 and again in 2012, when the competition ended.

The only option now is the football tournament at the Indian Ocean Games, which has been staged sporadically since 1979. Mayotte did not enter until 2007 but have proved successful against more experienced teams, securing bronze on their debut and reaching the final in 2015, losing 3-1 to Reunion.

Some Mahorais from metropolitan France take part but the squad is mainly locals and Mayotte, who won bronze again at the last event in 2019, expects to send a team to Madagascar for the 2023 Games.

"We hope the girls will be there too," says Guillaume Brouste, who works for the French federation as regional technical director at the Ligue Mahoraise de Football, the governing body for football in Mayotte.

Brouste has been on the island since 2005 and says the biggest obstacles to developing the game there are: "the level of supervision, the condition of the playing surfaces and the lack of interest in football for the little ones."

Mayotte is a member of the unrecognised Union of Indian Ocean Football Federations. Mohamed Boinariziki, the president of the Mayotte league, holds the same position at the UIOFF, which only organises club and junior competitions.

At a senior level, playing for neighbouring Comoros is an option but a controversial one.

In 1975, three of the four islands in the Comoros archipelago – Grande Comore, Anjouan and Moheli – secured independence but Mayotte voted to remain part of France.

The Comoros still lays claim to Mayotte and striker Toifilou Maoulida, who was born in Dzaoudzi and spent a decade in France playing for clubs including Montpellier and Lens, was asked to play.

Maoulida turned the Comoros down but Red Star Belgrade striker El Fardou Mohamed Ben Nabouhane, who was born in Passamainty, took up the offer and featured at this year's Africa Cup of Nations.

For ambitious Mahorais, the Coupe de France looks likely to remain their main regular opportunity to play off the island.

Mayotte born ...El Fardou Ben Nabouhane in action for the Comoros at AFCON 2021

Senegal claim their first AFCON title

Talisman Sadio Mane sinks decisive penalty after nervy final shootout

Senegal lived up to their pre-event billing as favourites and took a first Africa Cup of Nations title although it was by no means a convincing triumph for the continent's top-ranked team.

But the Lions of Teranga's success will forever have the stain of the deadly stadium stampede that overshadowed the tournament and condemned Cameroon to one of the worst continental championships in decades.

The deaths of eight people, with a further seven seriously injured, came as a result of poor organisation, lax security controls and general dereliction of duty.

This was an event that came close to being cancelled less than a month before kick-off because of concerns over Cameroon's hosting ability, which were then realised in horrific tragedy.

Penalty hero... keeper Edouard Mendy celebrates after winning the final shootout

Yaounde's newly-built Olembe Stadium, where a surge of fans attempting entry into the ground caused a crush, was still being hastily completed days before the kick-off of the tournament, itself twice delayed by Cameroon's failure to be ready and then the COVID pandemic.

A barely playable pitch saw the other showpiece new stadium in Douala prematurely shut in another embarrassing setback, and there were a litany of tales about poor training facilities, inadequate accommodation and severe food poisoning that hit two sides staying at the same hotel.

The folly of Zambian referee Janny Sikazwe twice blowing early during a key early match between Mali and Tunisia also rained down ridicule, and there were some overzealous red cards and VAR referrals.

MARK GLEESON

Champions...captain Kalidou Koulibaly lifts the trophy aloft with his team-mates

It would be disingenuous to write off Cameroon 2021 as a total disaster. After a bizarre string of 1-0 scorelines in the first week came intriguing twists and turns, highlighted by some fairy-tale shocks that brought the competition to life

But it would be disingenuous to write off Cameroon 2021 as a total disaster. After a bizarre string of 1-0 scorelines in the first week came intriguing twists and turns, highlighted by some fairy-tale shocks that brought the competition to life and will have put to bed the argument that a 24-team tournament means too many mediocre matches.

Senegal had a markedly easy path to the winners' podium, facing only one formidable foe – in the final where a fatigued Egypt ran out of fuel.

Yet, it was touch and go before Sadio Mane redeemed a squandered penalty, early in the game, to see Senegal home.

They played seven matches, of which three were scoreless stalemates, scored one goal in the opening round, yet still topped their group, and then had a path in the knockout stages that took in the Cape Verde Islands, Equatorial Guinea and Burkina Faso before the final.

All the heavyweight contenders were congregated in the other half of the draw where Egypt waded through the field, needing two penalty shootouts and a third game decided in extra-time.

After defending champions Algeria and Ghana were surprisingly blown away in the group stage, the Ivory Coast, Mali and Nigeria quickly followed in the last 16 and Morocco and Tunisia went meekly in the quarter-finals.

But if fortune then did favour Senegal, they still needed to overcome the obstacle of arriving in Cameroon without many key players, left behind in Dakar by a sudden COVID-19 outbreak in their camp as they were preparing to leave.

It meant the likes of captain Kalidou Koulibaly, midfielder Nampalys Mendy, striker Famara Diedhiou and goalkeeper Edouard Mendy all missed the opening matches, leaving a threadbare squad for the start before the affected players eventually emerged from isolation to join up again with their team-mates.

There was also a tug of war with Watford over Ismaila Sarr, who had suffered a knee injury in the Premier League match against Manchester United in November and who his club asserted was by no means ready.

But coach Aliou Cisse insisted he come to the training camp for assessment and eventually Senegal and Watford worked out a rehabilitation programme that allowed Sarr to get to Cameroon and play in the last three games of the tournament, actually starting in the final.

He is one of the key components of an exciting generation of Senegalese players, who have the potential to remain a force in the African game for years to come.

The side has been markedly reinforced over the past year by a concerted campaign to entice French-born players to switch their international allegiance. Former French junior internationals like Boulaye Dia, Abdou Diallo, Bouna Sarr, Fode Ballo-Toure and most latterly Marseille midfielder Pape Gueye, who only made his Senegal debut in November.

Gueye was the subject of a rare tiff between CAF and FIFA, who banned him just days into the tournament following the summer 2020 transfer controversy, when he signed contracts with both Watford and Marseille at the same time, prompting a complaint from the Premier League outfit.

The case has been ongoing for over a year but it was questioned why FIFA suddenly banned him days into the Cup of Nations with his appeal yet to be heard. Eventually the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) overturned the decision to suspend Gueye, allowing him a stay of execution, and a role as something of a super sub for Senegal.

Senegal's Cup of Nations success is also the fruits of being patient with a coach and giving him time to build a winning team. Rarely in Africa has a man been in charge for almost eight years but Cisse has now delivered.

The 45-year-old captained Senegal in the 2002 final but squandered the vital kick in the penalty shootout as they lost to Cameroon, months before going on to reach the World Cup quarter-finals in Japan and South Korea. He has come through the coaching ranks at the federation, assistant coach of the U23 side at the London Olympics before taking over the seniors, and now serves as the poster boy for a growing movement to use more local coaches at the helm of African national teams. "I think this man deserves all the success he gets because he is the most criticised coach I have ever seen in my life, but he never gives up," said Sadio Mane during the tournament.

But Cisse will be the first to acknowledge all great teams need great players and Mane's talismanic role cannot be understated. He was named Player of the Tournament, despite not producing that many sparkling performances. But his presence, like that of Salah in the Egypt team, lifted the rest up to the level where they could be crowned African champions.

Party...Senegal fans celebrate on the streets of Dakar

Liverpool stars meet in the final

Heartbroken... Salah walks past the AFCON trophy

LAST 16

African football's propensity to shoot itself in the foot was no better illustrated than in the last 16 when Comoros were denied the use of a goalkeeper in their historic tie against hosts Cameroon, turning the clash into a farce.

The debutants, looking to continue their fairy-tale run at the expense of the host nation, suffered a huge crisis before the game with two of their three goalkeepers in quarantine after positive COVID-19 tests and first-choice Salim Ben Boina out with a shoulder injury. This led to several training sessions to test which of their outfield players might be able to fill in but, on the eve of the clash in Yaounde, second-choice goalkeeper Ali Ahamada tested negative (three days after his positive test).

A cloud of confusion then reigned until just hours before kick-off, when CAF confirmed that the 30-year-old Ahamada had not fulfilled its protocols, stating a player who tests positive for coronavirus must isolate for five days before taking another PCR test 48 hours before his side's next match.

This, in addition to a CAF directive issued before the tournament that teams would be required to play a match if they had a minimum of 11 players available, meant the spectre of left-back Chaker Alhadhur going in goal, taping his number onto the back of an oversized goalkeeper shirt in a tawdry advertisement for the African game.

The drama of the game did at least attempt to change that image. In a Hollywood-style spectacle the 30-year-old made a series of stops – albeit far from orthodox – to keep Cameroon at bay, before they finally scored through Karl Toko Ekambi and Vincent Aboubakar. Comoros lost captain Jimmy Abdou to a red card after only six minutes yet, despite a makeshift keeper and ten men, made a real fight of it – even scoring a late consolation from Youssouf M'Changama that proved one of the goals of the tournament.

Earlier that same day, Musa Barrow had scored to hand fellow debutants Gambia a shock 1-0 win over Guinea, and two days later Equatorial Guinea held out against a much-fancied Mali side to take the game to extra-time and then win on penalties. The shock results continued into the knockout round.

Nigeria's form from the group stage deserted them in a dour affair with Tunisia in Garoua, where an effort from Youssef Msakni caught keeper Maduka Okoye unawares and proved decisive.

The heavyweight clash of the round was between Egypt and the Ivory Coast, who both had opportunities to score. Egypt lost goalkeeper Mohamed El Shenawy to injury but his replacement Mohamed Abougabal – AKA "Gabaski" – proved the penalty shootout hero as another former winner bowed out.

In the other ties, Morocco beat Malawi 2-1 despite Gabadinho Mhango scoring an exceptional long-range strike for the Flames, Burkina Faso edged out Gabon on penalties, and Senegal got the better of Cape Verde 2-0 thanks to goals by Sadio Mane and Bamba Dieng.

QUARTER-FINALS

Gambia failed to get a single shot on target and Equatorial Guinea's fighting spirit was severely curtailed as their fairy-tale runs came to an end in sedate fashion in the last eight.

Cameroon's 2-0 win over Gambia was a one-sided affair and a first show of real competence from the hosts, boosting home hopes for the final straight. However, it took them 50 minutes to break down the Scorpions with Lyon's Karl Toko Ekambi then scoring twice in seven minutes to ensure victory.

Underdogs... Comoros players console each other after their last-16 exit to Cameroon

That was followed the same day by a shock success for Burkina Faso against Tunisia in Garoua, with the teenager Dango Ouattara continuing to build a reputation with a goal that displayed both his physical and mental strength. He then spoilt it by being sent off later in the game, albeit a tad harshly, for a stray elbow in an aerial challenge that ruled himself out of the rest of the tournament. The 1-0 win was quickly followed by the sacking of Tunisia coach Mondher Kebaier.

A day later, Egypt and Morocco met in a testy affair in Yaounde where Morocco looked good in the opening ten minutes, going ahead with an early penalty from Sofiane Boufal, but quickly faded out of

Delight...Burkina Faso celebrate knocking Gabon out on penalties to reach the quarter-finals

the contest as Egypt came from behind to win. Mohamed Salah equalised and then set up the extra-time winner for Trezeguet. It was followed by the customary tunnel bust-up between the north Africans, with heavy sanctions handed out afterwards on both sides.

With the Olembe Stadium shut after the stadium tragedy, Senegal and Equatorial Guinea then took to the Ahmadou Ahidjou Stadium in the second of the double-header attraction. After Famara Diedhiou had put Senegal ahead, they allowed Equatorial Guinea back in with an early second-half equaliser before restoring their superiority with goals from Cheikhou Kouyate and Ismaila Sarr, making a belated entry at the tournament after recovering from a knee injury.

SEMI-FINALS

It took 70 minutes for the deadlock to be broken in the semi-final showdown between Senegal and Burkina Faso at the Ahmadou Ahidjou Stadium, after two penalties were reversed by VAR. But in the end Senegal's superiority was rewarded with a second successive appearance in the final.

Some magic from the centre-backs got it started with Kalidou Koulibaly's bicycle-kick providing the assist for his partner Abdou Diallo to hammer home. That was followed quickly by a second six minutes later with Idrissa Gana Gueye cheekily claiming it, despite TV replays appearing to show Bamba Dieng had actually scored his second of the tournament, making a strong claim for a starting berth in the final. Senegal then sat back and invited trouble in the last ten minutes with Blati Toure pulling one back. But, as they went in search of an unlikely equaliser, Sadio Mane caught them on the counter to finish matters off with a cool, dinked effort.

Cameroon and Egypt met 24 hours later at the Olembe Stadium, re-opened after the deadly crush, and although defender Michael Ngadeu Ngadjui came close with two early chances for the Indomitable Lions, the heavy pitch made it tough on both teams, already much fatigued after five games in the tournament. Samuel Gouet also shaved the woodwork with a long-range bullet in the second half but it was Egypt who finished stronger in extra-time, and they could have won it in dramatic style in the last minute when Ramadan Sobhi whipped in a cross from the right that narrowly missed three team-mates all attempting to get on the end of it.

In the shootout, Gabaski – retaining his place in the line-up – was the hero once again, saving two penalties before Clinton N'Jie blazed his kick wide to confirm Egypt's place in the final.

> It looked as if it might turn into a horror evening for Sadio Mane, whose final showdown with his Liverpool team-mate Mohamed Salah dominated the build-up

They would be without coach Carlos Queiroz for the showpiece though, after his continual bickering with Gambian referee Bakary Gassama saw him red carded. The Egyptians were the only ones who saw some sort of conspiracy in his appointment and his performance, which was typically beyond reproach.

Hero...Sadio Mane steps up to take the decisive penalty

FINAL

Liverpool's Sadio Mane squandered an early penalty but showed great mental fortitude to step up and convert the decisive kick for his country as Senegal won their first-ever Cup of Nations, beating Egypt 4-2 on penalties after a goalless draw in Yaounde.

A poorly-timed tackle by the youthful Egyptian defender Mohamed Abdelmonem on wing-back Saliou Ciss handed Senegal a seventh-minute penalty in a dramatic start to the final, but a powerful kick straight down the middle from Mane was stopped by Gabaski, continuing his heroics in goal for the Pharaohs.

It looked as if it might turn into a horror evening for Mane, whose showdown with his Liverpool team-mate Mohamed Salah dominated the build-up.

Ismaila Sarr, starting his first game of the tournament after recovering from a knee injury, set up two glorious chances soon thereafter with tricky runs down the wing and inviting balls across the face of the goal that a sliding Mane failed to connect with.

Egypt were largely pinned back, although the competent defending of Mahmoud El Wensh did much to stymie Senegal's chances. Salah had Egypt's first chance from a tight angle on the stroke of half-time.

Substitute Bamba Dieng forced two good saves out of Gabaski as Senegal continued to dominate, although Egypt could have snatched victory late on as Edouard Mendy hesitated to come out for a free-kick and allowed Marwan Hamdy to get a touch with his head that went agonisingly close.

Fatigue was all too evident as a fourth match in a row for Egypt went into extra-time – a tournament first – but they looked confident going into the shootout given they had won two en route to the final.

But after not failing with a single penalty previously, it all unravelled for the Egyptians as Abdelmonem hit the post and then Mohanad Lasheen had his kick saved by Mendy, allowing Mane to step up and win the title to leave Salah in tears.

Giants fall at first hurdle

GROUP A

When Gustavo Sangare scored to put Burkina Faso ahead after 24 minutes of the opening game of the tournament, the probability of a shock loss for the hosts looked real.

Cameroon were clearly nervous and struggling under a burden of expectation at the new Olembe Stadium and were there for the taking. But the Burkinabe contrived to throw away the opportunity, giving away two needless penalties and allowing the Indomitable Lions to come back and win the game.

Both spot-kicks were converted by captain Vincent Aboubakar for an unconvincing 2-1 triumph but it offered great relief to Cameroon, who were then able to put on a gala performance for their supporters in the next match as they beat Ethiopia 4-1 in Yaounde, with Aboubakar and Karl Toko Ekambi both grabbing braces.

With qualification assured, there was expectation of a 100 per cent finish to the group, but the Cape Verde Islands held them to a 1-1 draw, with Garry Rodrigues' cheeky backheeled equaliser among the goals of the tournament.

Burkina Faso edged Cape Verde into second place, but only on goals scored, and with both having four points their progress was also assured. Ethiopia grabbed a point in their last game as they held the Burkinabe to a 1-1 draw.

Hosts...Cameroon players celebrate during their opener against Burkina Faso

GROUP B

It seems almost incredulous that pre-tournament favourites Senegal topped the group despite scoring a single goal. And a disputed one at that, handed to them in stoppage time at the end of the opening game in Bafoussam against Zimbabwe. A handball decision looked harsh but Sadio Mane converted for an unconvincing victory.

Thereafter followed similarly tepid showings against Guinea and Malawi, which both ended goalless. They might even have lost to Malawi had the referee not changed his mind about a penalty decision that he had originally awarded to the Flames.

Guinea edged Malawi in their opener and were already through with four points after two games when they lost their last game to the already-eliminated Zimbabwe. Captain and talisman Naby Keita contrived to get himself booked at the end of a meaningless encounter for a second caution of the tournament, ruling himself out of the last 16.

Malawi were severely affected by COVID-19 infections and against Guinea had only two substitutes with the rest of their squad in quarantine. They got more players back after that, and with a full squad produced a come-from-behind 2-1 win over Zimbabwe followed by a draw with Senegal that was not only unexpected but ensured they advanced to the knockout stage as one of the four best third-place finishers.

Solitary scorer...Liverpool winger Sadio Mane netted Senegal's only goal of the group stage

GROUP C

Morocco and Gabon took the top two places but it was the Comoros Islands' shock elimination of Ghana that headlined the group action.

The two clashed in Garoua in their last group game with both needing victory to progress. But instead of a predicted romp for the four-time winners, it was the tiny island nation who humbled the Black Stars, going two goals up and seeing Ghana captain Andre Ayew red carded early on. The fairy tale threatened to crash as a ten-man Ghana fought back to equalise but Ahmed Mogni snatched a late winner for one of the great tournament upsets.

Comoros still had to wait two more days before their place in the second round was confirmed. For Ghana it was a major calamity that saw coach Milovan Rajevac shouldering the brunt of the blame – and ultimately sacked just days later. Their woes had begun with defeat to Morocco in their first game and then giving up a late equaliser to Gabon in a tempestuous 1-1 draw.

Morocco's hopes of a clean sweep were denied by Gabon, who held them to a 2-2 draw, doing so without Pierre-

Upset...Comoros players celebrate their victory over Ghana

Shock exit...Algeria captain Riyad Mahrez

Emerick Aubameyang. His AFCON proved a disaster from the moment he arrived with a COVID-19 infection to his early departure back to London.

GROUP D

Nigeria proved the only country to come through the first stage of the tournament with a 100 per cent record, putting aside their chaotic preparations which included firing coach Gernot Rohr and sending late call-up letters to players, leading to forwards Emmanuel Dennis and Odion Ighalo staying with their clubs.

Kelechi Iheanacho scored a cracker to get them going in Garoua against Egypt in a match that they thoroughly deserved to win. The Super Eagles then dispatched Sudan 3-1 in an easy victory, meaning they could rest almost all their first-choice players for the last game against Guinea-Bissau, which they won 2-0.

Losing their opening game heaped a host of criticism on Egypt and coach Carlos Queiroz, who responded in terse tones, provoking even more abuse. It did simmer down after a 1-0 win over Guinea-Bissau, although Egypt were fortunate that a stunning equaliser from Mame Balde was disallowed by VAR for a tug on defender Omar Kamal in the build-up.

Egypt then beat Sudan 1-0 in their last group game for second place but again in unconvincing fashion with Mohamed Salah struggling to combine with his team-mates. Guinea-Bissau and Sudan only managed a single point each and were therefore both eliminated at the first hurdle.

GROUP E

Never before has a defending champion been so humiliatingly dumped out of the Cup of Nations as Algeria were in Douala. The Fennec Foxes came into the tournament on a hot streak of 34 unbeaten internationals and looking strong candidates to retain their title.

The first game against Sierra Leone, back at the finals for the first time since 1996, ended goalless and proved a portent of things to come, although at the time it looked like a minor hiccup for a slick Algerian machine. But then came a sensational tussle with tiny Equatorial Guinea, who never looked overawed and grabbed a 70th-minute winner from defender Esteban Obiang.

It was a sensational victory, the likes of which had not been seen at the tournament previously. Ivory Coast had four points by then, although gifted Sierra Leone a second draw with a bizarre goalkeeping howler in the last minute of their 2-2 draw.

All four teams still had a chance of qualifying in the last round of games with Algeria needing to win. But they still looked shell-shocked as the Ivorians sent them packing with a 3-1 win, while Equatorial Guinea eliminated Sierra Leone, who would have advanced with a draw but veteran striker Kei Kamara squandered a late penalty.

Never before has a defending champion been so humiliatingly dumped out of the Cup of Nations as Algeria were in Douala

GROUP F

Gambia had proven the giant killers in the qualifiers, topping a group that included Gabon, DR Congo and Angola, and enhanced that reputation in their tournament debut. They beat Mauritania 1-0 to start with, shared a penalty apiece with Mali in a 1-1 draw in their second game and then upset north African giants Tunisia thanks to a last-minute screamer from Ablie Jallow.

Seven points put them tied at the top of the standings with Mali – far exceeding expectations – while Tunisia scrapped through in third despite losing two of their three games. They were saved by a 4-0 win over Mauritania in their middle group match before then being badly hit by a COVID-19 outbreak in their camp.

The key game was always going to be at start of the fixture list when Mali beat Tunisia in their opening game through an Ibrahima Kone penalty, while Wahbi Khazri missed one for Tunisia.

Mali should have also beaten Gambia, giving away a last-gasp spot-kick, but showed their class with a 2-0 win over Mauritania at the end of the group play.

Giant killers... Gambia's goalscoring hero Ablie Jallow

Oceania World Cup Qualifiers

STEVE MENARY

New Zealand the heavy favourites ahead of COVID-disrupted campaign

Eight Oceania teams head to Qatar to compete for a place at the World Cup

The shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic hangs heavily over the Oceania region's qualifiers for this year's World Cup.

None of the Oceania Football Confederation's members were able to secure government permission to host international football, so the entire qualifying process will take place in Qatar – without American Samoa, Tonga or Samoa.

Jess Ibrom, technical director at Football Federation Samoa, explains: "It's impossible to participate. No one is flying into or out of Samoa. The OFC region is a big challenge due to the vaccination rates. I honestly think it will be a few years before there is inter-island football in the region again."

Those countries going can access FIFA's Forward programme to help fund a trip that for the likes of Tahiti involves travelling 18,000 miles. Eight countries have agreed to go, but any side that pulls out could lose any funding for

Favourites... New Zealand are expected to advance to the inter-confederational play-offs

Preview

Underdogs...Tahiti in action at the Under-20 World Cup in 2019

travel expenses and may face a claim for damages from FIFA – although that would be harsh given the circumstances.

"Logistically it has been an extremely challenging exercise," said OFC General Secretary Franck Castillo.

Most countries are looking for friendlies in Qatar before the tournament starts. The international window runs March 21-29 but the main qualifiers run from March 17-30, so overseas-based players must choose between club and country.

New Zealand lobbied for a straight knockout but many island sides, which have not played since the 2019 Pacific Games, supported the league system that will be used in Qatar. Kiwi star striker, Chris Wood, labelled the system as "ridiculous." His new club, Newcastle United, have a Premier League fixture against Crystal Palace on March 19, and will not be keen to let him travel to Qatar any earlier than they have to.

The OFC Nations Cup has not been staged since 2016 and most countries in Oceania have not played since the 2019 Pacific Games. Teams whose best overseas players choose country over club will inevitably have a better chance of progressing and Group B is much the harder.

Even the winner will not definitely qualify. Whichever Oceania side wins the final on March 30 faces a play-off back in Qatar in June with the fourth-ranked side from the CONCACAF region – possibly Costa Rica or Panama – before booking a place at the finals.

LEADING CONTENDERS

Two-time World Cup finalists and current Nations Cup holders, New Zealand have more professionals than any other side in Oceania but most are overseas. Some may not choose to go to Qatar but the depth of the All Whites squad still makes Danny Hay's team favourites.

New Caledonia were runners-up to New Zealand's Under-23 side in the last Pacific Games in 2019 and the club game is improving rapidly. Two sides from the French overseas territory – Hienghene Sport and Megenta – made the final of the OFC Champions League in 2019, the last year that it was contested.

LIKELY CHALLENGERS

The Solomon Islands are the second-highest ranked side and should qualify from Group A. Spanish coach Felipe Vega-Arango has been involved in the Solomon Islands since 2017 and the expansion of the S-League in 2021 to 12 teams helped broaden the playing base.

THE NEXT RUNG

Brazilian coach Marcos Gusmao has worked hard since taking charge of Papua New Guinea last summer and his squad will draw heavily on local giants Hekari United for experience.

Most of Tahiti's golden generation that won the 2012 Nations Cup are in their 30s, but striker Teaonui Tehau is only 29 and was in good form at the last Pacific Games, scoring eight goals. Tahiti have a promising new generation with big tournament experience after qualifying for the Under-20 World Cup finals in 2019.

INTERESTING OUTSIDERS

Playing at the 2017 Under-20 World Cup was a boost for a generation of players from Vanuatu, such as Bong Kalo, but most of the squad will come from the local semi-professional Port Vila League. Participation of overseas-based players, notably Auckland City's central defender Brian Kaltack, could give Vanuatu a chance of progress.

Qualification for the 2016 Olympic Games was a major fillip for Fiji, but only two of that squad are likely to go to Qatar. Roy Krishna, who currently plays in India for ATK Mohun Bagan, is the only overseas player in the squad, and much will depend on Fiji's talismanic striker and captain in a tough group.

As for the Cook Islands, they were originally scheduled to face Tonga in a pre-qualifier on March 13, but their opponents were forced to withdraw due to the volcano that erupted in January, meaning the Cooks now go straight into Group A. Their chances of qualifying have been disrupted by a six-year ban handed down last summer to president Lee Harmon, along with the fact that they haven't played a single international match since September 2015, meaning they are the only FIFA member nation currently unranked.

> "I honestly think it will be a few years before there is inter-island football in the region again"
>
> Jess Ibrom, Football Federation Samoa

Fiji talisman... Roy Krishna at the 2016 Olympics

THE DRAW

GROUP A

- Solomon Islands
- Tahiti
- Vanuatu
- Cook Islands

GROUP B

- Fiji
- New Caledonia
- New Zealand
- Papua New Guinea

Japan

MIKE PLASTOW

Kawasaki Frontale aim for three in a row

J.League holders go into the new season as favourites to retain their title

The 2022 J.League season kicks off on February 18 with Kawasaki Frontale again the team to beat after finishing 13 points clear at the top of the table last campaign and securing their fourth J.League title in five seasons. Kawasaki did this in spite of losing three national team players – Hidemasa Morita, Kaoru Mitoma and Ao Tanaka – to European clubs before and during last season, and still finished the year with seven players in the J.League's Best XI.

For 2022, the defending champions have signed another promising crop of youngsters out of high school and university, lost one of Japan's most exciting Olympic players – the versatile Reo Hatate, to Celtic – and brought in a big name of Asian football, Thailand captain Chanathip Songkrasin, from Hokkaido Consadole Sapporo.

Attacking midfielder Chanathip, now 28 and at the height of his career, has been with Sapporo in the J.League since 2017 and may be Hatate's ideal replacement. He was under contract with Sapporo until 2025 and Frontale are reported to have paid a record Japanese domestic transfer fee worth over £2.8 million to get him.

Celtic's forays into the Japanese football market have cast a shadow on two of the chasing clubs as well, Yokohama F. Marinos and Vissel Kobe, who finished second and third respectively in last year's J.League.

Yokohama F. Marinos lost their manager, Ange Postecoglou, to Celtic in the summer, and then Japan striker Daizen Maeda, joint-top scorer in the league, at the end of December. In spite of that, Yokohama held on to

Team to beat... Kawasaki Frontale celebrate a goal in last season's J.League

second place all through the second half of last season under Postecoglou's successor, Kevin Muscat, won their highest points total ever, and their bright, attacking football stands to lose none of its lustre this year. Brazilians Elber, Leo Ceara and Marcos Junior, as well as 2019 J.League Player of the Year Teruhito Nakagawa, are all still available for front-line duty.

Kyogo Furuhashi was Vissel Kobe's top goalscorer in the league when he joined Celtic last summer, but the club still enjoyed their best season and highest-ever points total in 2021. Vissel made their big moves in the transfer market directly after Furuhashi's departure, signing Japan strikers Yoshinori Muto from Newcastle United and Yuya Osako from Werder Bremen, plus former Barcelona forward Bojan Krkic. Andres Iniesta, now aged 37, enjoyed a strong second half of last season after recovering from surgery on his quad at the end of 2020. Manager Atsuhiro Miura starts his third year in charge at the helm of a well-settled team.

Other teams to watch in 2022 include Urawa Reds – where Spanish manager Ricardo Rodriguez has overseen a major clear-out – the ever powerful Kashima Antlers, and Nagoya Grampus.

Rodriguez starts his second season at Urawa with the Emperor's Cup under his belt already and a fresh, uniquely Scandinavian flavour to the team. Urawa ended 2021 on a high with a 2-1 victory over Oita Trinita in the Emperor's Cup final in December. The big names who have gone include Tomoaki Makino to Vissel Kobe, former Leicester City and Japan midfielder Yuki Abe, who has retired, striker Shinzo Koroki to Hokkaido Consadole Sapporo, and veteran full-back Tomoya Ugajin to FC Gifu. The close-season loss of 22-year Daiki Hashioka on loan to Sint-Truidense VV is also sure to hurt.

Urawa, however, like Vissel, have been rebuilding since the middle of last year, starting with the signings of Danish striker Kasper Junker from Bodo/Glimt and defender Alexander Scholz from FC Midtjylland, plus regular Japan full-back Hiroki Sakai from Marseille. The new arrivals now also include defenders Tetsuya Chinen and Tomoya Inukai from FC Ryukyu and Kashima Antlers respectively, and the swift Swedish left-winger, David Moberg Karlsson, formerly of Sunderland, on a full transfer from Czech giants Sparta Prague.

Kashima Antlers, fourth last year, make a fresh start in 2022 under Swiss manager Rene Weiler, the first European to lead a club that has traditionally always turned to Brazil. Perhaps that has not really changed with Brazilians still occupying all five foreign player slots in the squad, but a crack has appeared in the edifice.

Other managerial changes include Kenta Hasegawa, who takes over from Massimo Ficcadenti at Nagoya Grampus, Albert Puig, who replaces Hasegawa at FC Tokyo, and Michael Skibbe, in for interim manager Kentaro Sawada at Sanfrecce Hiroshima.

The 2022 season could also go down as the first year of the post-Kazu era in Japan's top flight. With the relegation of 54-year-old Kazuyoshi Miura's team, Yokohama FC, and Kazu's own loan transfer to fourth-tier Suzuka Point Getters, there seems no way back now for Kazu, who set perhaps his ultimate first-division appearance record at the grand old age of 54 years and 12 days in March last year. But Suzuka are professional and managed by Kazu's older brother, Yasutoshi Miura. Kazu's record-breaking days may not be quite done yet.

Big name...Thailand captain Chanathip Songkrasin has joined champions Kawasaki Frontale

Andres Iniesta, now aged 37, enjoyed a strong second half of last season after recovering from surgery on his quad at the end of 2020

Ex-Barca forward Bojan Krkic...now at Vissel Kobe

Record breaker... 54-year-old Kazu Miura may have played his last J.League game

United States

JAMES NALTON

New faces in new Major League Soccer season

The 2022 MLS campaign begins on February 26

Major League Soccer continues to make its mark on the global game as it heads into its 27th season. The movement of players from MLS to other leagues around the world and vice versa has helped raise its profile in recent years, including a steady influx of young talent from South America, promising American and Canadian players leaving to ply their trade in Europe, and big-name arrivals.

One of the biggest names will join midway through the 2022 season when Lorenzo Insigne moves to Toronto FC in July. In terms of quality plus profile, he will be one of the best players to ever arrive in MLS.

Toronto also hired a new head coach in Bob Bradley and will be looking to reassert themselves after a poor showing in 2021, though they will have their work cut out if they are to catch last season's Supporters' Shield winners, New England Revolution.

Bruce Arena's side are losing two important players in highly-rated 23-year-old Canadian winger Tajon Buchanan, who joined Club Brugge in January, and United States international goalkeeper Matt Turner, who has agreed a summer move to Arsenal. Yet despite

MLS Cup holders...New York City FC

Exciting arrival... Toronto FC's new signing Insigne

these outgoings, New England should still be in the mix at the top of the overall table in 2022. No team has retained the Supporter's Shield since LA Galaxy did so back in 2011, but given their dominance last year it would take a huge drop-off for the Revs not to challenge again.

Last year's MLS Cup winners, New York City FC, also have the potential to be one of the best sides in 2022. Their underlying numbers stood out in 2021 along with another under-performer Los Angeles FC, and the two teams on opposite coasts will be hoping to convert that into points on the board this time around.

Further north on America's west coast, Seattle Sounders remain among the MLS heavyweights and will be considered one of the main challengers to New England's crown. They might be more fancied for the MLS Cup, though, having appeared in four of the previous six finals.

MLS continues to grow, as the league's expansion continues with the arrival of Charlotte FC for 2022. Spaniard Miguel Angel Ramirez, a 37-year-old manager that guided Ecuadorian side Independiente del Valle to the Copa Sudamericana in 2019, will coach the new team. Their most experienced recruit is ex-Leicester City defender Christian Fuchs, while Poland forward Karol Swiderski arrives from PAOK as their Designated Player.

Charlotte will join the Eastern Conference with Nashville switching back to the West, balancing out the two conferences to 14 teams apiece. Having finished third in their conference last season, Nashville will be looking to continue the progress they've made since joining the league in 2020. Their German attacking midfielder Hany Mukhtar is a standout player and only missed out on last season's MVP award due to the exceptional Carles Gil at New England.

There will be some hesitation in predicting another conference-topping season for Colorado Rapids in the West, but they have shown they can mix it despite not having the star names of some of the other teams.

Elsewhere in that Conference, the introduction of Scottish midfielder Ryan Gauld saw Vancouver Whitecaps finish the 2021 regular season in title-challenging form. They edged ahead of both LA sides to qualify for the post-season after Gauld and another mid-season signing, Brian White, added plenty of goals and creativity. If they can continue that into the new season they will do much more than scrape into the play-offs.

Toronto won't be the only club looking to make sure their results match their spending. Atlanta United, LAFC, LA Galaxy and FC Cincinnati can all count themselves in this group, but perhaps the highest-profile under-performers have been Inter Miami.

2022 almost feels like a second expansion year for the David Beckham-owned, Phil Neville-coached side, such has been the comprehensive nature of the rebuild. This has been partly facilitated by the transfer of Lewis Morgan to New York Red Bulls. The Scottish winger was Miami's standout player in their debut season two years ago and could thrive in the Red Bull system.

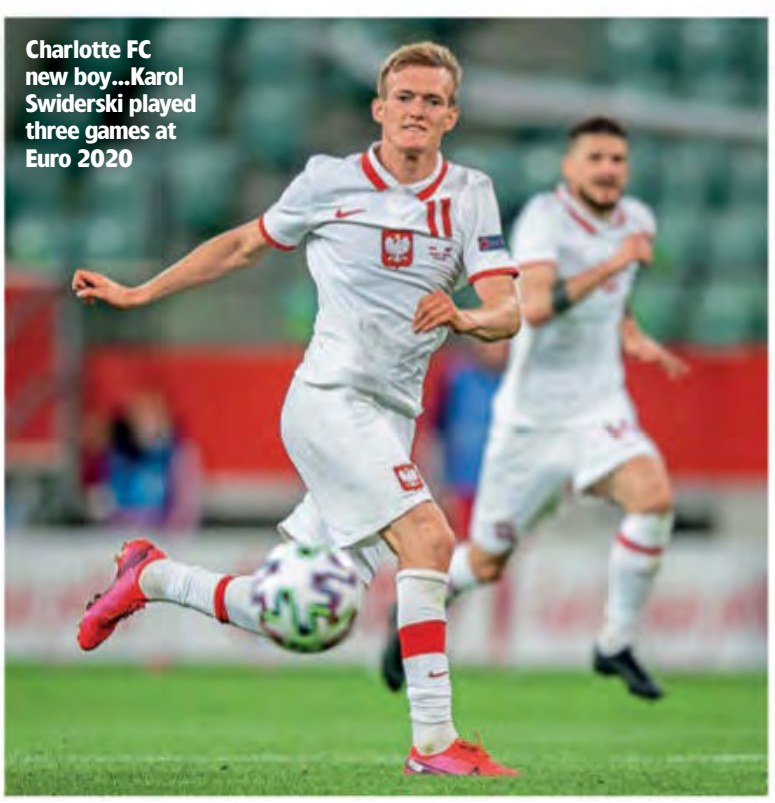
Another club hoping to improve are Columbus Crew. The 2020 MLS Cup winners failed to make the play-offs last year but should be considerably stronger this time around.

Last year's MLS Cup winners, New York City FC, also have the potential to be one of the best sides in 2022

It's also worth keeping an eye on the 2020 Supporters' Shield winners, Philadelphia Union. They boast an array of homegrown talent and 18-year-old Paxten Aaronson, brother of Red Bull Salzburg's Brenden, could be set for a big year as European club scouts look on.

And it won't just be Aaronson they will be watching, as this unpredictable, unique league continues to unearth talent and become an increasingly important part of the global football landscape.

New England Revolution boss...Bruce Arena



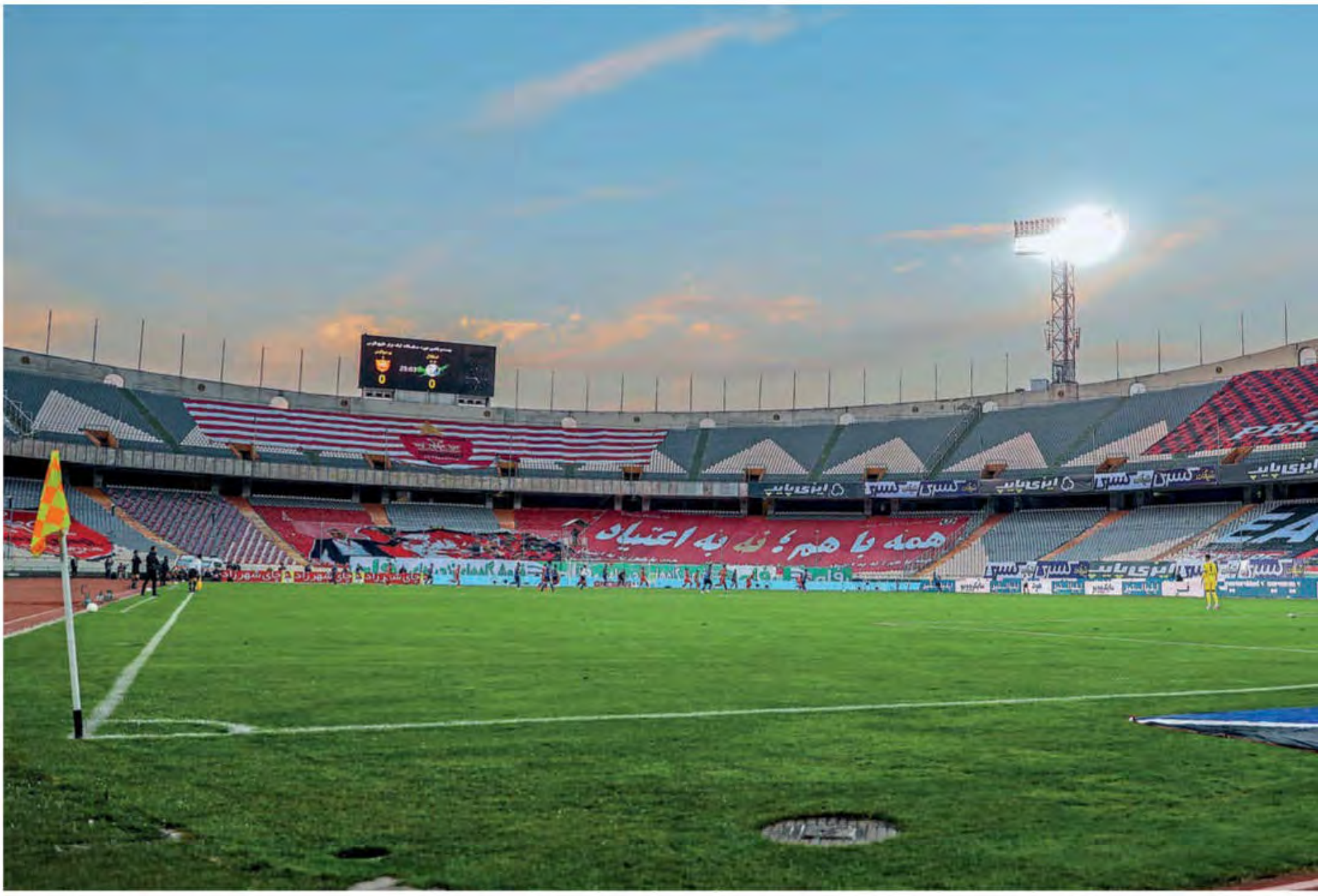
Charlotte FC new boy...Karol Swiderski played three games at Euro 2020

Iran

JOHN DUERDEN

Esteghlal and Persepolis kicked out of Asian Champions League

Iranian giants' expulsion from Asia's biggest club competition is not necessarily all bad news for football in the country



A giant of Asian football, Iran should also be a major power in the world game.

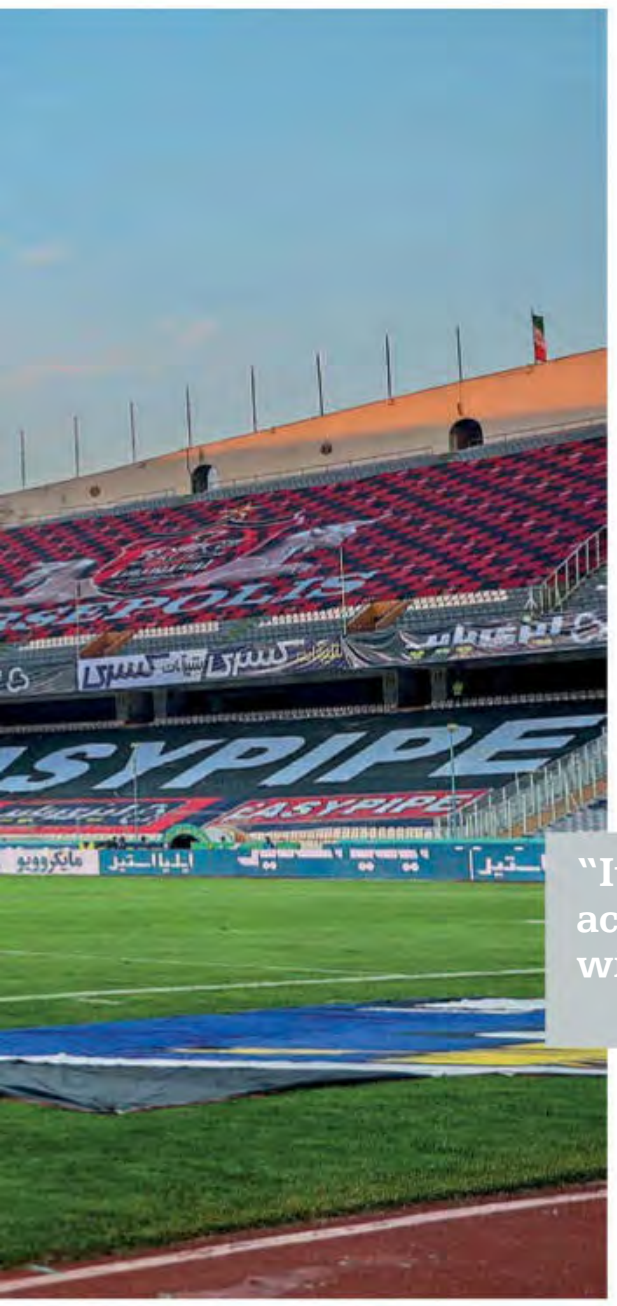
Yet one of the country's problems was laid bare for all to see earlier this year.

Persepolis and Esteghlal are the country's two biggest clubs and two of the biggest in Asia. They've got plenty in common: they share the same city of Tehran, the same iconic home – the Azadi Stadium – and each have fans around the world.

They were also both thrown out of the 2022 Asian Champions League in January.

It had been expected for a while and was confirmed with a short statement from the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), as the organisation finally lost patience with the Tehran titans. "The ECB (Entry Control Body) determined

Rivals... Esteghlal and Persepolis players square up during the Tehran derby in May



Impressive... Persepolis and Esteghlal's shared Azadi Stadium

that the three clubs [also in reference to Gol Gohar Sirjan] had not satisfied all of the mandatory criteria and, accordingly, should not have been granted licences to participate in the AFC Champions League 2022," the AFC said.

The organisation did not go into details but there are five criteria that must be met if licences are to be given and they cover the following fields: sporting, infrastructure, personnel and administrative, legal and, finally, financial.

The AFC wants clubs to have the big things such as youth academies, women's teams and marketing strategies, as well as the small things like administration departments that provide the necessary documentation in the correct language. The record of some Iranian clubs in such matters could be better.

> "It's really shocking. It's very difficult for me to accept it. Those who caused this historic scandal with their decisions must be held responsible"
>
> Persepolis coach Yahya Golmohammadi

Much of this comes from the way they are organised, with most teams in the country owned either directly or indirectly by the state. With Persepolis, who have appeared in two of the past four Champions League finals, and Esteghlal, continental title winners in 1970 and 1991, a huge problem was that both have been under the long-term ownership of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Such a thing is a no-no according to AFC rules and, despite late attempts to put them under different departments, the confederation have finally taken a tougher line after years of threatening to. There is also talk of significant debt and in the past both clubs have been sanctioned by FIFA after failing to pay players and coaches.

"It's really shocking. It's very difficult for me to accept it," Persepolis coach Yahya Golmohammadi said. "Those who caused this historic scandal with their decisions must be held responsible." Esteghlal, traditionally the team of the establishment, were also indignant.

Iran Football Federation president Shahaboddin Azizi-Khadem promised changes. "We will learn from the bitter experiences of the past, in order to take measures so that the football of the country meets the requirements of the AFC," he said.

While expulsion is a blow for Iranian football in the short term, there is not as much anger as you may think in the country. Fans have long accused the AFC of being pro-Arab and anti-Iran, but there is a growing feeling that this kind of action is exactly what is needed. For too long, authorities in Iran have promised reform in football but it has yet to happen.

Making Persepolis and Esteghlal into private entities won't be easy. The first hurdle is simply gathering the political will to do so, though perhaps the AFC's act will give them a push in the right direction.

That is the hope. If Iran had the same level of football governance as Japan, for example, then the sky would be the limit. With a stronger structure, the national team, already strong, would improve further. The country produces great players such as Sardar Azmoun and Mehdi Taremi, two of Asia's top strikers who have been tearing it up in Europe with Bayer Leverkusen and Porto respectively. Over half of the national squad are based in Europe but those who stay home deserve a more professional set-up.

The fact that they now regularly appear at World Cups (four of the last six, with a place at Qatar now also secured) is vastly impressive given the long-standing issues with preparation, facilities and a local league that has fallen behind the best in the continent.

Asian football needs teams like Persepolis and Esteghlal to be involved in the top competitions but it would be better for all if they can emerge as professionally run, self-sustainable and forward-looking clubs.

China

JOHN DUERDEN

Shandong Taishan return to the top

Yet the future is beginning to look bleak for both the Chinese Super League and the China national team

The best thing to be said about the 2021 Chinese Super League season is that it was completed. Compared to five years ago, when top-tier clubs spent around £330 million on players in the winter transfer window – more than any other league in the world – there wasn't much international interest as the 2021 season came to an end. It is even debatable as to how much attention local fans paid to the championship race.

"Shandong Taishan savoured winning its fifth Chinese Super League title over the weekend," said *China Daily*, the Chinese Communist Party's newspaper. "However, the news barely caused a stir on social media amid dwindling interest in the financially stricken domestic game."

The financial issues in Chinese football have come to dominate everything. On February 28 of last year, shortly before the season kicked off, defending champions Jiangsu FC went out of business. Owners Suning, the retail giant that also has a majority stake in Italian side Internazionale, had been looking to cut costs and announced that the plug was being pulled. Shortly after, TEDA got out of Tianjin and only a quick intervention by the local government stopped another club going out of business.

Stars such as Hulk, Alex Teixeira, Axel Witsel, Graziano Pelle and Yannick Carrasco had all left. The biggest names to remain were Oscar with Shanghai Port and Paulinho at Guangzhou, though with Brazilian players struggling to enter China due to strict travel restrictions, the former Tottenham Hotspur and Barcelona star

Champions... Shandong Taishan players celebrate with the trophy

Star man... Marouane Fellaini

The sight of Chongqing coach Chang Woe-ryong in tears after the final game of the season at the sacrifices his players had made summed it all up.

To make matters worse, the league – until recently the biggest and highest profile in Asia – played a distant fiddle to the national team. With the final round of World Cup qualification starting last summer, the domestic program was suspended from August to December. It would have been a controversial decision even if China had managed to secure a place in Qatar, but just one win from the first eight games has left them out of contention, and coach Li Tie out of a job.

So, after four months, the action resumed. Shandong, helped by Marouane Fellaini, took the title fairly comfortably in the end, finishing six points above Shanghai Port. It was a fitting win for the Jinan club: in 2010, they were the last side to win the league before the big spending started. Now that it has stopped, they have returned to the top. It has not been lost on anyone that Shandong are not owned by real estate companies but by various state entities.

After Shanghai Port came the troubled Guangzhou, with Fabio Cannavaro leaving as coach mid-season amid rumours that Evergrande are trying to sell. In fourth came a surprise package in the shape of Changchun Yatai. At the other end of the table, Dalian Pro, also financially struggling and coached by Rafa Benitez until January 2021 (though it feels much longer ago), slipped down to the second tier along with bottom club Qingdao – both clubs lost relegation play-offs.

All will be glad to say goodbye to the season but it remains to be seen how many teams are still around when the 2022 campaign starts, probably in April. The top tier is due to expand from 16 to 18 in 2022 but adding more teams isn't the priority – ensuring the survival of the original members is paramount. It may well get worse before it gets better for the Chinese Super League but one thing is for sure, it can't afford a 2022 like 2021.

didn't play a game and soon departed.

The football finally started in April but, due to the pandemic, the games were held in just two cities of Guangzhou and Suzhou. Compared to the empty stadiums of 2020, small crowds were allowed in but the drop in ticket sales, broadcasting rights, and media and sponsorship interest meant that the fall in revenue hit hard.

Then came even more serious news. Evergrande, a huge property developer, bought Guangzhou in 2010 and then started the spending wave. In came big stars and coaches such as Marcello Lippi and Luiz Felipe Scolari. The huge downturn in China's real estate market of late has left Evergrande as the world's most indebted company, over £200 billion in the red.

With 11 other top-tier clubs being owned, either in full or in part, by companies from the same industry, it is no surprise that the likes of Chongqing Liangjiang Athletic and Hebei FC, among others, have been struggling to pay players and bills.

It was a fitting win for the Jinan club: in 2010, they were the last side to win the league before the big spending started. Now that it has stopped, they have returned to the top

Out of business...the abandoned training ground of 2020 CSL champions Jiangsu FC

FEBRUARY 18-MARCH 18

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

(All kick-off times, if stated, are BST)

Friday February 18

ITALY: The Turin derby between Juventus and Torino takes place at Juve's Allianz Stadium.
AFRICA: The second matchday of the CAF Champions League begins, with holders Al Ahly among the sides in action.

Saturday February 19

ENGLAND: Pep Guardiola and Antonio Conte go head-to-head as Tottenham visit Manchester City.
FRANCE: Lens take on Lyon and Nantes face PSG in Ligue 1.

Sunday February 20

SPAIN: The Basque derby between Athletic Bilbao and Real Sociedad takes place at the San Mames, with Valencia and Barca also in action.
ENGLAND: Leeds United host old arch-rivals Manchester United.
WOMEN: The Arnold Clark Cup continues, with England v Spain followed by Canada v Germany.

Monday February 21

ITALY: Cagliari face Napoli and Bologna take on Spezia in Serie A.

Tuesday February 22

EUROPE: The Champions League continues with Chelsea v Lille and Villarreal v Juventus in the last 16.

Wednesday February 23

WOMEN: Molineux is the host of the final matchday of the Arnold Clark Cup, with Spain v Canada and England v Germany.
EUROPE: Ralf Rangnick takes his Manchester United team to Atletico Madrid, while Benfica face Ajax.

Thursday February 24

EUROPE: The Europa League and Europa Conference League play-off second legs take place. Rangers v Dortmund and Napoli v Barca are involved in the former, with Bodo/Glimt v Celtic and Randers v Leicester involved in the latter.

Friday February 25

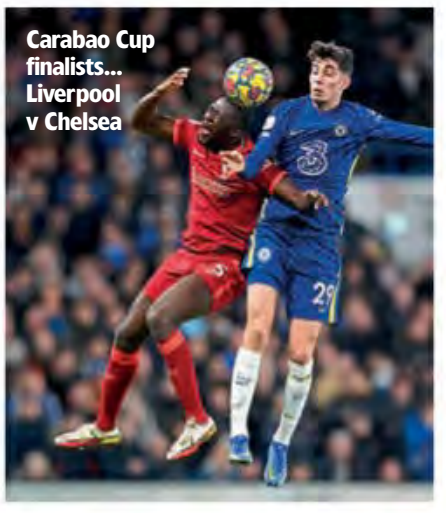
EUROPE: The round of 16 draws for both the Europa League and Europa Conference League take place in Nyon, Switzerland.
ENGLAND: Southampton host Norwich in the Premier League.

Saturday February 26

ENGLAND: Frank Lampard takes on one of his old club as Everton travel to Manchester City, after Leeds United face Tottenham.
SPAIN: Real Madrid make the short trip to face Rayo Vallecano, before Atletico take on Celta Vigo.
FRANCE: PSG host Saint-Etienne.
USA: The 2022 Major League Soccer campaign begins.

Sunday February 27

ENGLAND: The Carabao Cup final takes place at Wembley between Liverpool and Chelsea.


Carabao Cup finalists... Liverpool v Chelsea

SPAIN: With Sevilla and Betis flying high in La Liga, one of the biggest ever Seville derbies takes place.

Tuesday March 1

FRANCE: The first Coupe de France semi-final takes place, with the other tie being played a day later.
GERMANY: Union Berlin host second-tier St Pauli in the first German Cup quarter-final.

Wednesday March 2

SPAIN: The second leg of the Copa del Rey semi-finals take place, featuring Athletic Bilbao, Rayo Vallecano, Real Betis and Valencia.
GERMANY: The three remaining German Cup quarter-finals take place as Hamburg play Karlsruhe, Hannover take on RB Leipzig, and Bochum host Freiburg.

Saturday March 5

WOMEN: The FA Women's League Cup final takes place between Manchester City and Chelsea.
ENGLAND: Leicester face Leeds United and Liverpool host West Ham United in the Premier League.

Sunday March 6

ENGLAND: Watford host Arsenal, before Ralf Rangnick experiences his first Manchester derby as his United side travel to the Etihad Stadium to face arch-rivals City.
GERMANY: Bayern Munich host Leverkusen in the Bundesliga.
ITALY: Napoli take on Milan in a top-of-the-table clash in Serie A.
SPAIN: There's a key match in La Liga too, with Champions League hopefuls Betis taking on Atletico.

Monday March 7

ENGLAND: Tottenham host Everton in the Premier League.

Tuesday March 8

EUROPE: In the Champions League, Bayern Munich take on Red Bull Salzburg and Internazionale make the trip to Anfield to face Liverpool.
SOUTH AMERICA: The first round of the 2022 Copa Sudamericana campaign begins. Elsewhere, the second legs of the final qualifying round for the Copa Libertadores group stage also take place.

Wednesday March 9

EUROPE: PSG travel to the Bernabeu for the second leg of their Champions League tie with Real Madrid, while Manchester City host Portugal's Sporting.

Thursday March 10

EUROPE: The first legs of the round of 16 games in both the Europa League and Europa Conference League take place.

Saturday March 12

ENGLAND: Manchester United take on Tottenham after Brighton host Liverpool in the Premier League.

Sunday March 13

ENGLAND: Also in England's top flight, Chelsea face Newcastle and Arsenal take on Leicester.

Monday March 14

ENGLAND: Crystal Palace host Manchester City in a big game on *Monday Night Football*.

Tuesday March 15

EUROPE: The Champions League second leg tie of Manchester United v Atletico Madrid takes place at Old Trafford, while Benfica travel to Amsterdam to face Ajax.

Wednesday March 16

EUROPE: The Champions League last 16 concludes with Lille against Chelsea and Juventus v Villarreal, with the draw for the quarters and semis taking place two days later.

Thursday March 17

EUROPE: It's the second legs of the last-16 games in the Europa League and Europa Conference League.
QATAR: Oceania's World Cup qualifiers get underway, starting with Tahiti v Vanuatu and Cook Islands v Solomon Islands.

Friday March 18

QATAR: Group B of OFC World Cup qualification also begins, with Papua New Guinea v New Zealand and New Caledonia v Fiji.

OFC World Cup qualification... New Zealand are in action

AFRICA: The penultimate matchday of the CAF Champions League group stage takes place.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

JANUARY 2022

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	15
Edouard Mendy (Chelsea)	12
Ederson (Manchester City)	7
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	5
David Ospina (Napoli)	4
Alisson (Liverpool)	3
David De Gea (Manchester United)	3
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	2
Aaron Ramsdale (Arsenal)	2
Oliver Baumann (Hoffenheim)	1
Walter Benitez (Nice)	1
Bono (Sevilla)	1
Gianluigi Donnarumma (PSG)	1
Mark Flekken (Freiburg)	1
Alfred Gomis (Rennes)	1
Samir Handanovic (Internazionale)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Juan Musso (Atalanta)	1
Maty Ryan (Real Sociedad)	1
Jose Sa (Wolves)	1
Yann Sommer (B. M'gladbach)	1

DEFENDERS

Joao Cancelo (Manchester City)	27
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	20
Kalidou Koulibaly (Napoli)	17
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	16
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	12
Antonio Rudiger (Chelsea)	11
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	10
Marquinhos (PSG)	9
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	9
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	8
Reece James (Chelsea)	7
Thiago Silva (Chelsea)	7
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	6
Milan Skriniar (Internazionale)	6
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	5
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	5
Aymeric Laporte (Manchester City)	5
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	5
Marcos Alonso (Chelsea)	4
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	4
Ben Chilwell (Chelsea)	4
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	4
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	4
Marcos Acuna (Sevilla)	2
Cesar Azpilicueta (Chelsea)	2
Davide Calabria (Milan)	2
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	2
Jules Kounde (Sevilla)	2
Joel Matip (Liverpool)	2
Kieran Tierney (Arsenal)	2
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	2
Dani Alves (Barcelona)	1
Jerome Boateng (Lyon)	1
Leonardo Bonucci (Juventus)	1
Andreas Christensen (Chelsea)	1
Aaron Cresswell (West Ham United)	1
Juan Cuadrado (Juventus)	1
Dante (Nice)	1
Ben Davies (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Merih Demiral (Atalanta)	1
Aritz Elustondo (Real Sociedad)	1
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Alex Grimaldo (Benfica)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Goncalo Inacio (Sporting)	1
Thilo Kehrer (PSG)	1
Philipp Lienhart (Freiburg)	1
Lisandro Martinez (Ajax)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Thomas Meunier (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Jesus Navas (Sevilla)	1
Jose Luis Palomino (Atalanta)	1
Benjamin Pavard (Bayern Munich)	1
Gerard Pique (Barcelona)	1
Boris Popovic (Cercle Brugge)	1
Mario Rui (Napoli)	1
Mamadou Sakho (Montpellier)	1
Chris Smalling (Roma)	1
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	1
Rafael Toloi (Atalanta)	1
Takehiro Tomiyasu (Arsenal)	1
Lucas Verissimo (Benfica)	1
Ben White (Arsenal)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	14
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	13
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	12
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	10
Casemiro (Real Madrid)	9
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	8
Jorginho (Chelsea)	7
Thomas Muller (Bayern Munich)	6
Idrissa Gueye (PSG)	5
Ilkay Gundogan (Manchester City)	5
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	5
Mason Mount (Chelsea)	5
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	4
N'Golo Kante (Chelsea)	4
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	4
Mikel Merino (Real Sociedad)	4
Piotr Zielinski (Napoli)	4
Marcelo Brozovic (Internazionale)	3
Fabinho (Liverpool)	3
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	3
Franck Kessie (Milan)	3
Rodri (Manchester City)	3
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	3
Fabian (Napoli)	2
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	2
Christopher Nkunku (RB Leipzig)	2
Declan Rice (West Ham United)	2
Thiago (Liverpool)	2
Sandro Tonali (Milan)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2
Houssem Aouar (Lyon)	1
Jude Bellingham (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Ismael Bennacer (Milan)	1
Sergio Busquets (Barcelona)	1
Philippe Coutinho (Aston Villa)	1
Nabil Fekir (Real Betis)	1
Pedro Goncalves (Sporting)	1
Kai Havertz (Chelsea)	1
Thorgan Hazard (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Jordan Henderson (Liverpool)	1
Ander Herrera (PSG)	1
Joan Jordan (Sevilla)	1

Manuel Locatelli (Juventus)	1
Lovro Majer (Rennes)	1
Joao Moutinho (Wolves)	1
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	1
Lucas Ocampos (Sevilla)	1
Otavio (Porto)	1
Mario Pasalic (Atalanta)	1
Dimitri Payet (Marseille)	1
Paul Pogba (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Rakitic (Sevilla)	1
Teji Savanier (Montpellier)	1
Aurelien Tchouameni (Monaco)	1
Youri Tielemans (Leicester City)	1
Hans Vanaken (Club Brugge)	1
Marco Verratti (PSG)	1
Axel Witsel (Borussia Dortmund)	1

FORWARDS

Robert Lewandowski (Bayern Munich)	50
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	35
Karim Benzema (Real Madrid)	22
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	19
Erling Haaland (Borussia Dortmund)	10
Kylian Mbappe (PSG)	8
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	6
Cristiano Ronaldo (Manchester United)	5
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	5
Luis Diaz (Liverpool)	4
Sebastien Haller (Ajax)	4
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	4
Serge Gnabry (Bayern Munich)	3
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Raheem Sterling (Manchester City)	3
Karim Adeyemi (Red Bull Salzburg)	2
Amine Gouiri (Nice)	2
Diogo Jota (Liverpool)	2
Romelu Lukaku (Chelsea)	2
Riyad Mahrez (Manchester City)	2
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	2
Lionel Messi (PSG)	2
Giovanni Simeone (Verona)	2
Mehdi Taremi (Porto)	2
Duvan Zapata (Atalanta)	2
Tammy Abraham (Roma)	1
Wissam Ben Yedder (Monaco)	1
Steven Berghuis (Ajax)	1
Moussa Dembele (Lyon)	1
Memphis Depay (Barcelona)	1
Breel Embolo (B. M'gladbach)	1
Ciro Immobile (Lazio)	1
Lorenzo Insigne (Napoli)	1
Alexander Isak (Real Sociedad)	1
Harry Kane (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Sadio Mane (Liverpool)	1
Gerard Moreno (Villarreal)	1
Marco Reus (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Hakim Ziyech (Chelsea)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport Express* (Russia), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *TIPS Bladet* (Denmark), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

2021 AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

ALGERIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Moustapha **ZEGHBA**	(31) 21.11.1990	Damac (KSA)
16	Alexandre **OUKIDJA**	(33) 19.07.1988	Metz (Fra)
23	Rais **M'BOLHI**	(35) 25.04.1986	Al Ettifaq (KSA)

DEFENDERS

2	Aissa **MANDI**	(30) 22.10.1991	Villarreal (Spa)
3	Mehdi **TAHRAT**	(32) 24.01.1990	Al Gharafa (Qat)
4	Djamel **BENLAMRI**	(32) 25.12.1989	Qatar SC (Qat)
5	Amine **TOUGAI**	(22) 22.01.2000	Esperance (Tun)
17	Abdelkader **BEDRANE**	(29) 02.04.1992	Esperance (Tun)
20	Youcef **ATAL**	(25) 17.05.1996	Nice (Fra)
21	Ramy **BENSEBAINI**	(26) 16.04.1995	Borussia M'gladbach (Ger)
24	Ilyes **CHETT**	(27) 22.01.1995	Esperance (Tun)
25	Houcine **BENAYADA**	(29) 08.08.1992	Etoile du Sahel (Tun)
28	Mohamed **HALAIMIA**	(25) 28.08.1996	Beerschot (Bel)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Ramiz **ZERROUKI**	(23) 26.05.1998	FC Twente (Ned)
10	Sofiane **FEGHOULI**	(32) 26.12.1989	Galatasaray (Tur)
11	Yacine **BRAHIMI**	(32) 08.02.1990	Al Rayyan (Qat)
12	Haris **BELKEBLA**	(28) 28.01.1994	Brest (Fra)
14	Sofiane **BENDEBKA**	(29) 09.08.1992	Al Fateh (KSA)
15	Farid **BOULAYA**	(28) 25.02.1993	Metz (Fra)
18	Adam **OUNAS**	(25) 11.11.1996	Napoli (Ita)
19	Adem **ZORGANE**	(22) 06.01.2000	Sporting Charleroi (Bel)
22	Ismael **BENNACER**	(24) 01.12.1997	Milan (Ita)
26	Mohammed **AMOURA**	(21) 09.05.2000	Lugano (Sui)

FORWARDS

7	Riyad **MAHREZ**	(30) 21.02.1991	Manchester City (Eng)
8	Youcef **BELAILI**	(29) 14.03.1992	Unattached
9	Baghdad **BOUNEDJAH**	(30) 24.11.1991	Al Sadd (KSA)
13	Islam **SLIMANI**	(33) 18.06.1988	Lyon (Fra)
27	Said **BENRAHMA**	(26) 10.08.1995	West Ham United (Eng)

COACH

Djamel **BELMADI** (45) 25.03.1976

BURKINA FASO

GOALKEEPERS

1	Aboubacar **SAWADOGO**	(32) 10.08.1989	Rail Club du Kadiogo
16	Herve **KOFFI**	(25) 16.10.1996	Sporting Charleroi (Bel)
23	Farid **OUEDRAOGO**	(25) 26.12.1996	USFA
27	Kilian **NIKIEMA**	(18) 22.06.2003	ADO Den Haag (Ned)

DEFENDERS

3	Oula **TRAORE**	(26) 29.09.1995	Horoya (Gui)
4	Soumaila **OUATTARA**	(26) 04.07.1995	Raja (Mar)
5	Patrick **MALO**	(30) 18.02.1992	Hassania Agadir (Mar)
9	Issa **KABORE**	(20) 12.05.2001	Troyes (Fra)
12	Edmond **TAPSOBA**	(23) 02.02.1999	Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)
13	Herman **NIKIEMA**	(33) 30.11.1988	Salitas
14	Issoufou **DAYO**	(30) 06.08.1991	RS Berkane (Mar)
25	Steeve **YAGO**	(29) 16.12.1992	Aris Limassol (Cyp)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Saidou **SIMPORE**	(29) 31.12.1992	Al Ittihad (Egy)
7	Eric **TRAORE**	(25) 21.05.1996	Pyramids (Egy)
18	Ismahila **OUEDRAOGO**	(22) 05.11.1999	PAOK (Gre)
20	Gustavo **SANGARE**	(25) 08.11.1996	Quevilly-Rouen (Fra)
22	Blati **TOURE**	(27) 04.08.1994	Eskilstuna (Swe)
24	Adama **GUIRA**	(33) 24.04.1988	Racing Rioja (Spa)

FORWARDS

2	Djibril **OUATTARA**	(22) 19.09.1999	Olympique de Safi (Mar)
8	Dramane **NIKIEMA**	(33) 17.10.1988	Horoya (Gui)
10	Bertrand **TRAORE**	(26) 06.09.1995	Aston Villa (Eng)
11	Mohamed **KONATE**	(24) 12.12.1997	Akhmat Grozny (Rus)
15	Abdoul **TAPSOBA**	(20) 23.08.2001	Standard Liege (Bel)
17	Zakaria **SANOGO**	(25) 11.12.1996	Ararat-Armenia (Arm)
19	Hassane **BANDE**	(23) 30.10.1998	Istra 1961 (Cro)
21	Cyrille **BAYALA**	(25) 24.05.1996	Ajaccio (Fra)
26	Jean **BOTUE**	(19) 07.08.2002	Ajaccio (Fra)
28	Dango **OUATTARA**	(20) 11.02.2002	Lorient (Fra)

COACH

Kamou **MALO** (59) 31.12.1962

CAMEROON

GOALKEEPERS

1	Jean **EFALA**	(29) 11.08.1992	Akwa United (Nga)
16	Devis **EPASSY**	(29) 02.02.1993	OFI Heraklion (Gre)
23	Simon **OMOSSOLA**	(23) 05.05.1998	AS Vita Club (Cod)
24	Andre **ONANA**	(25) 02.04.1996	Ajax (Ned)

DEFENDERS

2	Enzo **EBOSSE**	(22) 11.03.1999	Angers (Fra)
4	Harold **MOUKOUDI**	(24) 27.11.1997	Saint-Etienne (Fra)
5	Michael **NGADEU-NGADJUI**	(31) 23.11.1990	Gent (Bel)
6	Ambroise **OYONGO**	(30) 22.06.1991	Montpellier (Fra)
17	Olivier **MBAIZO**	(24) 15.08.1997	Philadelphia Union (USA)
19	Collins **FAI**	(29) 13.08.1992	Standard Liege (Bel)
21	Jean-Charles **CASTELLETTO**	(27) 26.01.1995	Nantes (Fra)
22	Jerome **ONGUENE**	(24) 22.12.1997	RB Salzburg (Aut)
25	Nouhou **TOLO**	(24) 23.06.1997	Seattle Sounders (USA)

MIDFIELDERS

8	Andre-Frank **ZAMBO ANGUISSA**	(26) 16.11.1995	Napoli (Ita)
14	Samuel **GOUET**	(24) 14.12.1997	Mechelen (Bel)
15	Pierre **MALONG**	(26) 26.07.1995	Olympiakos (Gre)
18	Martin **HONGLA**	(23) 16.03.1998	Hellas Verona (Ita)
26	Jean **ONANA**	(22) 08.01.2000	Bordeaux (Fra)
27	James **LEA SILIKI**	(25) 12.06.1996	Middlesbrough (Eng)
28	Yvan **NEYOU**	(25) 03.01.1997	Saint-Etienne (Fra)

FORWARDS

3	Nicolas **NGAMALEU**	(27) 09.07.1994	Young Boys (Sui)
7	Clinton **N'JIE**	(28) 15.08.1993	Dinamo Moscow (Rus)
9	Stephane **BAHOKEN**	(29) 28.05.1992	Angers (Fra)
10	Vincent **ABOUBAKAR**	(30) 22.01.1992	Al Nassr (KSA)
11	Christian **BASSOGOG**	(26) 18.10.1995	Shanghai Shenhua (Chn)
12	Karl Toko **EKAMBI**	(29) 14.09.1992	Lyon (Fra)
13	Eric Maxim **CHOUPO-MOTING**	(32) 23.03.1989	Bayern Munich (Ger)
20	Ignatius **GANAGO**	(23) 16.02.1999	Lens (Fra)

COACH

Toni **CONCEICAO** (Por) (60) 06.12.1961

Major disappointment...previous champions Algeria

Goal machine...Cameroon striker Vincent Aboubakar

Hero...Comoros left-back Chaker Alhadhur playing in goal

CAPE VERDE

GOALKEEPERS

1	**VOZINHA**	(35) 03.06.1986	AEL Limassol (Gre)
12	Marcio **ROSA**	(24) 23.02.1997	Montalegre (Por)
23	Kevin **SOUSA**	(27) 06.06.1994	Mindelense
28	Elber **EVORA**	(22) 02.12.1999	AEL Limassol (Gre)

DEFENDERS

2	**STOPIRA**	(33) 20.05.1988	Fehervar (Hun)
3	**DINEY**	(27) 17.01.1995	FAR (Mar)
4	Roberto **LOPES**	(29) 17.06.1992	Shamrock Rovers (Ire)
13	Steeve **FURTADO**	(27) 22.11.1994	Beroe (Bul)
16	Dylan **TAVARES**	(25) 30.08.1996	Neuchatel Xamax (Sui)
17	Steven **FORTES**	(29) 17.04.1992	Oostende (Bel)
22	Jeffry **FORTES**	(32) 22.03.1989	De Graafschap (Ned)
27	**DELMIRO**	(33) 29.08.1988	Aris Limassol (Cyp)

MIDFIELDERS

5	Nuno **BORGES**	(33) 31.03.1988	Casa Pia (Por)
6	Marco **SOARES**	(37) 16.06.1984	Arouca (Por)
7	**PATRICK**	(29) 09.02.1993	Qarabag (Aze)
10	**JAMIRO**	(28) 23.11.1993	Philadelphia Union (USA)
11	Garry **RODRIGUES**	(31) 27.11.1990	Olympiakos (Gre)
14	**PONCK**	(27) 13.01.1995	Istanbul Basaksehir (Tur)
15	Willis **FURTADO**	(24) 04.09.1997	Jerv (Nor)
18	Kenny **ROCHA SANTOS**	(22) 03.01.2000	Oostende (Bel)
24	Joao **PAULO**	(23) 26.05.1998	Feirense (Por)
26	**NENASS**	(26) 05.07.1995	Aalesunds (Nor)

FORWARDS

8	Lisandro **SEMEDO**	(25) 12.03.1996	Fortuna Sittard (Ned)
9	Gilson **TAVARES**	(20) 29.12.2001	Estoril (Por)
19	Julio **TAVARES**	(33) 19.11.1988	Al Faisaly (KSA)
20	Ryan **MENDES**	(32) 08.01.1990	Al Nasr (UAE)
21	**VAGNER**	(26) 10.01.1996	Sion (Sui)
25	Willy **SEMEDO**	(27) 27.04.1994	Pafos (Gre)

COACH

BUBISTA (52) 06.01.1970

COMOROS

GOALKEEPERS

1	Salim **BOINA**	(30) 19.07.1991	Endoume (Fra)
16	Moyadh **OUSSENI**	(28) 02.04.1993	Frejus Saint-Raphael (Fra)
23	Ali **AHAMADA**	(30) 19.08.1991	Sans Club (Fra)

DEFENDERS

2	Kassim **ABDALLAH**	(34) 09.04.1987	Marignane Gignac (Fra)
3	Chaker **ALHADHUR**	(30) 04.12.1991	Ajaccio (Fra)
4	Younn **ZAHARY**	(23) 20.10.1998	Cholet (Fra)
5	Mohamed **ABDALLAH**	(22) 11.04.1999	Stade Lausanne (Sui)
6	Jimmy **ABDOU**	(37) 13.07.1984	Martigues (Fra)
12	Kassim **M'DAHOMA**	(25) 26.01.1997	Avranches (Fra)
15	Benjaloud **YOUSSOUF**	(28) 11.02.1994	Chateauroux (Fra)
19	Mohamed **YOUSSOUF**	(33) 26.03.1988	Ajaccio (Fra)
27	Kassim **AHAMADA**	(29) 18.04.1992	Creteil (Fra)
28	Alexis **SOUAHY**	(27) 13.01.1995	New Mexico United (USA)

MIDFIELDERS

8	Fouad **BACHIROU**	(31) 15.04.1990	Omonia Nicosia (Cyp)
10	Youssouf **M'CHANGAMA**	(31) 29.08.1990	Guingamp (Fra)
13	Rafidine **ABDULLAH**	(28) 15.01.1994	Stade Lausanne (Sui)
18	Yacine **BOURHANE**	(23) 30.09.1998	Go Ahead Eagles (Ned)
20	Ahmed **MOGNI**	(30) 10.10.1991	Annecy (Fra)
26	Iyad **MOHAMED**	(20) 05.03.2001	Auxerre (Fra)

FORWARDS

7	Faiz **SELEMANI**	(28) 14.11.1993	KV Kortrijk (Bel)
9	Mahamoud **M'CHANGAMA**	(34) 09.06.1987	Nouadhibou (Mtn)
11	Nakibou **ABOUBAKARI**	(28) 10.03.1993	Sete (Fra)
14	Ali **M'MADI**	(31) 21.04.1990	SAS Epinal (Fra)
17	Ibroihim **YOUSSOUF**	(27) 06.05.1994	TS Sporting (Saf)
21	El Fardou **BEN** Nabouhane	(32) 10.06.1989	Red Star Belgrade (Srb)
22	Said **BAKARI**	(27) 22.09.1994	RKC Waalwijk (Ned)
24	Faiz **MATTOIR**	(21) 12.07.2000	Cholet (Fra)
25	Djoumoi **MOUSSA**	(22) 16.07.1999	Saint-Priest (Fra)

COACH

Amir **ABDOU** (Fra) (49) 08.07.1972

EGYPT

GOALKEEPERS

1	Mohamed **EL SHENAWY**	(33) 18.12.1988	Al Ahly
16	Mohamed **ABOUGABAL**	(33) 29.01.1989	Zamalek
23	Mohamed **SOBHY**	(22) 15.07.1999	Pharco
24	Mahmoud **GAD**	(23) 01.10.1998	ENPPI

DEFENDERS

2	Mohamed **ABDELMONEM**	(23) 01.02.1999	Future
3	Omar **KAMAL**	(28) 29.09.1993	Future
6	Ahmed **HEGAZY**	(31) 25.01.1991	Al Ittihad (KSA)
12	Ayman **ASHRAF**	(30) 09.04.1991	Al Ahly
13	Ahmed Abou **EL FOTOUH**	(23) 22.03.1998	Zamalek
15	Mahmoud **EL WENSH**	(26) 01.06.1995	Zamalek
20	Mahmoud **ALAA**	(31) 28.01.1991	Zamalek
27	Marwan **DAWOUD**	(24) 27.08.1997	ENPPI

MIDFIELDERS

4	Amr **EL SOLIA**	(31) 02.04.1990	Al Ahly
5	Hamdy **FATHY**	(27) 29.09.1994	Al Ahly
8	Emam **ASHOUR**	(23) 20.02.1998	Zamalek
17	Mohamed **ELNENY**	(29) 11.07.1992	Arsenal (Eng)
18	Mohanad **LASHEEN**	(25) 29.05.1996	Tala'ea El Gaish
19	Abdallah **EL SAID**	(36) 13.07.1985	Pyramids
21	**ZIZO**	(26) 10.01.1996	Zamalek
25	Akram **TAWFIK**	(24) 08.11.1997	Al Ahly

FORWARDS

7	**TREZEGUET**	(27) 01.10.1994	Aston Villa (Eng)
9	Mohamed **SHERIF**	(26) 04.02.1996	Al Ahly
10	Mohamed **SALAH**	(29) 15.06.1992	Liverpool (Eng)
11	Ramadan **SOBHI**	(25) 23.01.1997	Pyramids
14	Mostafa **MOHAMED**	(24) 28.11.1997	Galatasaray (Tur)
22	Omar **MARMOUSH**	(23) 07.02.1999	Stuttgart (Ger)
26	Ibrahim **ADEL**	(20) 23.04.2001	Pyramids
28	Marwan **HAMDY**	(25) 15.11.1996	Smouha

COACH

Carlos **QUEIROZ** (Por) (68) 01.03.1953

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Jesus **OWONO**	(20) 01.03.2001	Alaves (Spa)
12	**MARIANO**	(22) 03.08.1999	Racing de Micomeseng
13	**SAPUNGA**	(29) 23.11.1992	Futuro Kings
25	Felipe **OVONO**	(28) 26.07.1993	Futuro Kings

DEFENDERS

2	**MIGUEL ANGEL**	(26) 08.10.1995	Futuro Kings
3	**MARVIN**	(24) 26.08.1997	Cacereno (Spa)
5	**COSME**	(31) 03.03.1990	Deportivo Unidad
11	**BASILIO**	(23) 17.01.1999	Start (Nor)
15	Carlos **AKAPO**	(28) 12.03.1993	Cadiz (Spa)
16	Saul **COCO**	(23) 09.02.1999	Las Palmas (Spa)
21	**ESTEBAN**	(23) 07.05.1998	Antequera (Spa)
23	Luis **MESEGUER**	(22) 07.09.1999	Navalcarnero (Spa)
26	Javier **AKAPO**	(25) 03.09.1996	Ibiza (Spa)
28	Luis **ENRIQUE**	(24) 16.01.1998	Cano Sport

MIDFIELDERS

4	Frederico **BIKORO**	(25) 17.03.1996	Hercules (Spa)
7	Ruben **BELIMA**	(30) 11.02.1992	Hercules (Spa)
8	**PEPIN**	(25) 14.08.1996	Monza (Ita)
14	Jannick **BUYLA**	(23) 06.10.1998	Gimnastic (Spa)
17	**JOSETE**	(23) 22.07.1998	Niki Volos (Gre)
20	Santiago **ENEME**	(21) 29.09.2000	Nantes (Fra)
22	Pablo **GANET**	(27) 04.11.1994	Real Murcia (Spa)
24	**ALEX BALBOA**	(20) 06.03.2001	Alaves (Spa)

FORWARDS

6	Iban **SALVADOR**	(26) 11.12.1995	Fuenlabrada (Spa)
9	Oscar **SIAFA**	(24) 12.09.1997	Olympiakos (Gre)
10	Emilio **N'SUE**	(32) 30.09.1989	Unattached
18	**DORIAN JR.**	(20) 12.05.2001	Langreo (Spa)
19	Luis **NLAVO**	(19) 30.11.2002	Braga (Por)
27	**PEDRO**	(25) 18.05.1996	Futuro Kings

COACH

Juan **MICHA**	(46) 28.07.1975	

ETHIOPIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Jemal **TASSEW**	(32) 27.04.1989	Adama City
22	Teklemariam **SHANKO**	(24) 02.01.1998	Sidama Coffee
23	Fasil **GEBREMICHAEL**	(21) 17.10.2000	Bahir Dar Kenema
28	Firew **GETAHUN**	(25) 08.09.1996	Dire Dawa City

DEFENDERS

2	Suleman **HAMID**	(24) 20.10.1997	St. George
4	Mignot **DEBEBE**	(26) 02.09.1995	St. George
5	Desta **YOHANNES**	(23) 17.04.1998	Hawassa City
15	Aschalew **TAMENE**	(30) 22.11.1991	Fasil Kenema
16	Yared **BAYEH**	(27) 22.01.1995	Fasil Kenema
20	Ramadan **YUSEF**	(21) 12.02.2001	Wolkite City
21	Asrat **TUNJO**	(25) 29.11.1996	Ethiopian Coffee
25	Ahmed **RESHID**	(26) 03.09.1995	Bahir Dar Kenema

MIDFIELDERS

3	Mesud **MOHAMMED**	(32) 18.02.1990	Jimma Aba Jifar
6	Gatoch **PANOM**	(27) 12.06.1994	St. George
7	Surafel **DAGNACHEW**	(24) 11.09.1997	Fasil Kenema
8	Amanuel **YOHANIS**	(22) 14.03.1999	Ethiopian Coffee
12	Yihun **ENDESHAW**	(29) 05.11.1992	Fasil Kenema
13	Firew **SOLOMON**	(29) 18.09.1992	Sidama Coffee
14	Fitsum **ALEMU**	(26) 15.07.1995	Bahir Dar Kenema
17	Bezabeh **MELEYO**	(26) 26.06.1995	Fasil Kenema
19	Shimeket **GUGESA**	(27) 01.01.1995	Wolaitta Dicha
27	Dawa **HOTESSA**	(25) 09.03.1996	Adama City

FORWARDS

9	Getaneh **KEBEDE**	(29) 02.05.1992	Wolkite City
10	Abubeker **NASSIR**	(21) 23.02.2000	Ethiopian Coffee
11	Amanuel **GEBREMICHAEL**	(23) 05.02.1999	St. George
18	Shimelis **BEKELE**	(31) 17.10.1990	El Gouna (Egy)
24	Mesfin **TAFESSE**	(20) 26.11.2001	Hawassa City
26	Mujib **KASSIM**	(26) 19.10.1995	JS Kabylie (Alg)

COACH

Wubetu **ABATE**	(43) 20.08.1978	

GABON

GOALKEEPERS

1	Jean **AMONOME**	(24) 24.12.1997	AmaZulu (Saf)
16	Anthony **MFA MEZUI**	(30) 07.03.1991	Rodange 91 (Lux)
21	Junior **NOUBI**	(22) 20.06.1999	Vannes (Fra)
23	Donald **NZE**	(29) 05.04.1992	AS Maniema Union (Cod)

DEFENDERS

2	Alex **MOUCKETOU-MOUSSOUNDA**	(21) 10.10.2000	Aris Limassol (Cyp)
3	Anthony **OYONO**	(20) 12.04.2001	Boulogne (Fra)
4	Sidney **OBISSA**	(21) 04.05.2000	Olympic Charleroi (Bel)
5	Bruno **ECUELE MANGA**	(33) 16.07.1988	Dijon (Fra)
6	Johann **OBIANG**	(28) 05.07.1993	Rodez (Fra)
8	Lloyd **PALUN**	(33) 28.11.1988	Bastia (Fra)
24	David **SAMBISSA**	(26) 11.01.1996	Cambuur (Ned)
25	Junior **AKUE**	(26) 22.07.1995	Aubagne (Fra)
27	Gilchrist **NGUEMA**	(25) 07.08.1996	Unattached
28	Yannis **N'GAKOUTOU**	(23) 30.09.1998	Lyon La Duchere (Fra)

MIDFIELDERS

12	Guelor **KANGA**	(31) 01.09.1990	Red Star Belgrade (Srb)
14	Louis **AMEKA**	(25) 03.10.1996	Maghreb de Fes (Mar)
15	Ulrick **ENEME ELLA**	(20) 22.05.2001	Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng)
17	Andre **BIYOGO POKO**	(29) 01.01.1993	Altay Izmir (Tur)
18	Mario **LEMINA**	(28) 01.09.1993	Nice (Fra)
19	Serge **JUNIOR** Martinsson Ngouali	(30) 23.01.1992	Gorica (Cro)
20	Denis **BOUANGA**	(27) 11.11.1994	Saint-Etienne (Fra)
26	Medwin **BITEGHE**	(25) 01.09.1996	Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby)

FORWARDS

7	Aaron **BOUPENDZA**	(25) 07.08.1996	Al Arabi (Qat)
9	Pierre-Emerick **AUBAMEYANG**	(32) 18.06.1989	Arsenal (Eng)
10	Axel **MEYE**	(26) 06.06.1995	Ittihad Tanger (Mar)
11	Jim **ALLEVINAH**	(26) 27.02.1995	Clermont (Fra)
13	Kevin **MAYI**	(29) 14.01.1993	Denizlispor (Tur)
22	Fahd **NDZENGUE**	(21) 07.07.2000	Tabor Sezana (Svn)

COACH

Patrice **NEVEU** (Fra)	(67) 29.03.1954	

Gabon...lost to Burkina Faso on penalties in the last 16

Surprise package...debutants Gambia upset the odds

Poor...Ghana finished rock bottom of their group

GAMBIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Modou **JOBE**	(33) 27.10.1988	Black Leopards (Saf)
18	Baboucarr **GAYE**	(23) 24.02.1998	Rot-Weiss Koblenz (Ger)
22	Sheikh **SIBI**	(23) 21.02.1998	Virtus Verona (Ita)

DEFENDERS

5	Omar **COLLEY**	(29) 24.10.1992	Sampdoria (Ita)
12	James **GOMEZ**	(20) 14.11.2001	Horsens (Den)
13	Pa Modou **JAGNE**	(32) 26.12.1989	Dietikon (Sui)
14	Noah Sonko **SUNDBERG**	(25) 06.06.1996	Levski Sofia (Bul)
16	Mohammed **MBYE**	(32) 18.06.1989	Ifo Bromolla (Swe)
21	Saidy **JANKO**	(26) 22.10.1995	Real Valladolid (Spa)
25	Bubacarr **SANNEH**	(27) 14.11.1994	Unattached
26	Ibou **TOURAY**	(27) 24.12.1994	Salford City (Eng)

MIDFIELDERS

2	Yusupha **BOBB**	(25) 22.06.1996	Piacenza (Ita)
3	Ablie **JALLOW**	(23) 14.11.1998	Seraing (Bel)
4	Dawda **NGUM**	(31) 02.09.1990	Unattached
6	Sulayman **MARREH**	(26) 15.01.1996	Gent (Bel)
7	Lamin **JALLOW**	(26) 18.12.1995	Fehervar (Hun)
8	Ebrima **DARBOE**	(20) 06.06.2001	Roma (Ita)
10	Musa **BARROW**	(23) 14.11.1998	Bologna (Ita)
11	Modou **BARROW**	(29) 13.10.1992	Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor)
15	Ebrima **SOHNA**	(33) 14.12.1988	Fortune
17	Bubacarr **JOBE**	(27) 21.11.1994	Norrby (Swe)
19	Ebrima **COLLEY**	(22) 01.02.2000	Spezia (Ita)
28	Ebou **ADAMS**	(26) 15.01.1996	Forest Green Rovers (Eng)

FORWARDS

9	Assan **CEESAY**	(27) 17.03.1994	Zurich (Sui)
20	Bubacarr **TRAWALLY**	(27) 10.11.1994	Ajman (UAE)
23	Muhammed **BADAMOSI**	(24) 27.12.1997	KV Kortrijk (Bel)
24	Dembo **DARBOE**	(23) 17.08.1998	Shakhtyor Soligorsk (Blr)
27	Yusupha **NJIE**	(28) 03.01.1994	Boavista (Por)

COACH

Tom **SAINTFIET** (Bel)	(48) 19.03.1973	

GHANA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Abdul **NURUDEEN**	(23) 08.02.1999	Eupen (Bel)
12	Lawrence **ATI-ZIGI**	(25) 29.11.1996	St. Gallen (Sui)
16	Joe **WOLLACOTT**	(25) 08.09.1996	Swindon Town (Eng)
24	Richard **ATTAH**	(26) 09.04.1995	Hearts of Oak

DEFENDERS

2	Andy **YIADOM**	(30) 02.12.1991	Reading (Eng)
3	Philomon **BAFFOUR**	(21) 06.02.2001	Dreams FC
4	Jonathan **MENSAH**	(31) 13.07.1990	Columbus Crew (USA)
14	Gideon **MENSAH**	(23) 18.07.1998	Bordeaux (Fra)
17	Abdul **BABA RAHMAN**	(27) 02.07.1994	Reading (Eng)
18	Daniel **AMARTEY**	(27) 21.12.1994	Leicester City (Eng)
23	Alexander **DJIKU**	(27) 09.08.1994	Strasbourg (Fra)
26	Abdul **MUMIN**	(23) 06.06.1998	Vitoria Guimaraes (Por)

MIDFIELDERS

5	Thomas **PARTEY**	(28) 13.06.1993	Arsenal (Eng)
6	Edmund **ADDO**	(21) 17.05.2000	Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda)
7	Abdul **ISSAHAKU**	(17) 08.03.2004	Dreams
11	Mubarak **WAKASO**	(31) 25.07.1990	Shenzhen FC (Chn)
15	Joseph **PAINTSIL**	(24) 01.02.1998	Genk (Bel)
19	Samuel **OWUSU**	(25) 28.03.1996	Al Fayha (KSA)
20	Mohammed **KUDUS**	(21) 02.08.2000	Ajax (Ned)
21	Iddrisu **BABA**	(26) 22.01.1996	Mallorca (Spa)
28	David **ABAGNA**	(23) 09.09.1998	Real Tamale United

FORWARDS

8	Daniel **KYEREH**	(25) 08.03.1996	St. Pauli (Ger)
9	Jordan **AYEW**	(30) 11.09.1991	Crystal Palace (Eng)
10	Andre **AYEW**	(32) 17.12.1989	Al Sadd (Qat)
13	Richmond **BOAKYE**	(29) 28.01.1993	Beitar Jerusalem (Isr)
22	**KAMALDEEN** Sulemana	(20) 15.02.2002	Rennes (Fra)
25	Benjamin **TETTEH**	(24) 10.07.1997	Yeni Malatyaspor (Tur)
27	Maxwell **QUAYE**	(24) 02.02.1998	Accra Great Olympics

COACH

Milovan **RAJEVAC** (Srb)	(68) 02.01.1954	

GUINEA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Aly **KEITA**	(35) 08.12.1986	Ostersund (Swe)
16	Moussa **CAMARA**	(23) 27.11.1998	Horoya
22	Ibrahim **KONE**	(32) 05.12.1989	Hibernians (Mlt)

DEFENDERS

3	Issiaga **SYLLA**	(28) 01.01.1994	Toulouse (Fra)
4	Ibrahima **CONTE**	(25) 03.04.1996	Chamois Niortais (Fra)
5	Saidou **SOW**	(19) 04.07.2002	Saint-Etienne (Fra)
13	Mohamed **CAMARA**	(24) 28.08.1997	Young Boys (Sui)
15	Mikael **DYRESTAM**	(30) 10.12.1991	Sarpsborg (Nor)
17	Ousmane **KANTE**	(32) 21.09.1989	Paris FC (Fra)
20	Pa **KONATE**	(27) 25.04.1994	Botev Plovdiv (Bul)
26	Fode **CAMARA**	(19) 23.06.2002	Horoya
27	Gaoussou **SIBY**	(21) 15.04.2000	Wakriya

MIDFIELDERS

2	Morlaye **SYLLA**	(23) 27.07.1998	Horoya
6	Amadou **DIAWARA**	(24) 17.07.1997	Roma (Ita)
7	Ibrahima **CISSE**	(27) 28.02.1994	Seraing (Bel)
8	Naby **KEITA**	(27) 10.02.1995	Liverpool (Eng)
12	Ibrahima **CONTE**	(30) 03.04.1991	Bnei Sakhnin (Isr)
14	Ilaix **MORIBA**	(19) 19.01.2003	RB Leipzig (Ger)
18	Seydouba **SOUMAH**	(30) 11.06.1991	Kuwait SC (Kwt)
19	Mamadou **KANE**	(25) 22.01.1997	Neftci (Aze)
23	Aguibou **CAMARA**	(20) 20.05.2001	Olympiakos (Gre)
24	Mory **KONATE**	(28) 15.11.1993	Sint-Truidense (Bel)

FORWARDS

9	Jose **KANTE**	(31) 27.09.1990	Kairat (Kaz)
10	Morgan **GUILAVOGUI**	(23) 10.03.1998	Paris FC (Fra)
11	Mohamed **BAYO**	(23) 04.06.1998	Clermont (Fra)
21	Sory **KABA**	(26) 28.07.1995	OH Leuven (Bel)
25	Mamadou **DIALLO**	(27) 19.09.1994	Grenoble (Fra)

COACH

Kaba **DIAWARA**	(46) 16.12.1975	

2021 AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

GUINEA-BISSAU

GOALKEEPERS

1	**JONAS**	(32) 20.11.1989	Unattached
12	Maurice **GOMIS**	(24) 10.11.1997	Ayia Napa (Cyp)
24	Manuel **BALDE**	(19) 14.11.2002	Vizela (Por)

DEFENDERS

2	Fali **CANDE**	(24) 24.01.1998	Portimonense (Por)
3	**LEONEL**	(33) 09.05.1988	Atletico Marinhense (Por)
4	Simao **JUNIOR**	(23) 29.08.1998	Vilafranquense (Por)
14	Fernandy **MENDY**	(28) 16.01.1994	Alloa Athletic (Sco)
15	Jefferson **ENCADA**	(23) 17.04.1998	Leixoes (Por)
21	**NANU**	(27) 17.05.1994	FC Dallas (USA)

MIDFIELDERS

5	Panutche **CAMARA**	(24) 28.02.1997	Plymouth Argyle (Eng)
6	**BURA**	(26) 22.12.1995	Farense (Por)
7	Mauro **RODRIGUES**	(20) 15.04.2001	Sion (Sui)
8	Mimito **BIAI**	(24) 12.12.1997	Academica (Por)
10	**PELE**	(30) 29.09.1991	Monaco (Fra)
16	Moreto **CASSAMA**	(24) 16.02.1998	Reims (Fra)
20	Sori **MANE**	(25) 03.04.1996	Moreirense (Por)
22	Opa **SANGANTE**	(31) 01.02.1991	Chateauroux (Fra)
23	Alfa **SEMEDO**	(24) 30.08.1997	Vitoria Guimaraes (Por)

FORWARDS

9	Steve **AMBRI**	(24) 12.08.1997	Sochaux (Fra)
11	**JORGINHO**	(26) 21.09.1995	Wisla Plock (Pol)
13	Frederic **MENDY**	(33) 18.09.1988	Vitoria Setubal (Por)
17	Mama **BALDE**	(26) 06.11.1995	Troyes (Fra)
18	**PIQUETI**	(29) 12.02.1993	Al Shoulla (KSA)
19	Joseph **MENDES**	(30) 30.03.1991	Chamois Niortais (Fra)

COACH

Baciro **CANDE**	(54) 06.04.1967	

IVORY COAST

GOALKEEPERS

1	Ira Eliezer **TAPE**	(24) 31.08.1997	San Pedro
16	N'Drin Ulrich **EDAN**	(29) 19.10.1992	AFAD Djekanou
23	Ali **SANGARE**	(35) 30.05.1986	JDR Stars (Saf)
26	Abdoul **CISSE**	(36) 20.10.1985	ASEC Mimosas

DEFENDERS

3	Ghislain **KONAN**	(26) 27.12.1995	Reims (Fra)
5	Wilfried **KANON**	(28) 06.07.1993	Pyramids (Egy)
6	Willy **BOLY**	(31) 03.02.1991	Wolverhampton Wanderers (Eng)
7	Odilon **KOSSOUNOU**	(21) 04.01.2001	Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)
14	Simon **DELI**	(30) 27.10.1991	Adana Demirspor (Tur)
17	Serge **AURIER**	(29) 24.12.1992	Villarreal (Spa)
21	Eric **BAILLY**	(27) 12.04.1994	Manchester United (Eng)

MIDFIELDERS

4	Jean Michael **SERI**	(30) 19.07.1991	Fulham (Eng)
8	Franck **KESSIE**	(25) 19.12.1996	Milan (Ita)
12	Habib **MAIGA**	(26) 01.01.1996	Metz (Fra)
13	Jeremie **BOGA**	(25) 03.01.1997	Sassuolo (Ita)
18	Ibrahim **SANGARE**	(24) 02.12.1997	PSV (Ned)
20	Serey **DIE**	(37) 07.11.1984	Sion (Sui)
25	Hamed **TRAORE**	(22) 16.02.2000	Sassuolo (Ita)
27	Jean-Daniel **AKPA AKPRO**	(29) 11.10.1992	Lazio (Ita)

FORWARDS

2	Karim **KONATE**	(17) 21.03.2004	ASEC Mimosas
9	Wilfried **ZAHA**	(29) 10.11.1992	Crystal Palace (Eng)
10	Jean **KOUASSI**	(27) 25.09.1994	Trabzonspor (Tur)
11	Maxwel **CORNET**	(25) 27.09.1996	Burnley (Eng)
15	Max **GRADEL**	(34) 30.11.1987	Sivasspor (Tur)
19	Nicolas **PEPE**	(26) 29.05.1995	Arsenal (Eng)
22	Sebastien **HALLER**	(27) 22.06.1994	Ajax (Ned)
24	Christian **KOUAME**	(24) 06.12.1997	Anderlecht (Bel)
28	Yohan **BOLI**	(28) 17.11.1993	Al Rayyan (Qat)

COACH

Patrice **BEAUMELLE** (Fra)	(43) 24.04.1978	

MALAWI

GOALKEEPERS

1	Charles **THOMU**	(23) 24.01.1999	Silver Strikers
16	Ernest **KAKHOBWE**	(28) 26.06.1993	Big Bullets
23	William **THOLE**	(23) 02.10.1998	Mighty Wanderers
24	Brighton **MUNTHALI**	(24) 11.12.1997	Silver Strikers

DEFENDERS

2	Stanley **SANUDI**	(27) 02.02.1995	Mighty Wanderers
3	Charles **PETRO**	(21) 08.02.2001	Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda)
4	Peter **CHOLOPI**	(25) 19.08.1996	Mighty Wanderers
5	Denis **CHEMBEZI**	(25) 15.01.1997	Polokwane City (Saf)
12	Mark **FODYA**	(24) 22.12.1997	Silver Strikers
15	Lawrence **CHAZIYA**	(23) 19.08.1998	CIVO United
19	Limbikani **MZAVA**	(28) 12.11.1993	AmaZulu (Saf)
21	Gomezgani **CHIRWA**	(25) 25.09.1996	Big Bullets
25	Paul **NDHLOVU**	(33) 18.02.1989	MAFCO
28	Daniel **CHIMBALANGA**	(23) 19.01.1999	MAFCO

MIDFIELDERS

6	Chikoti **CHIRWA**	(29) 09.03.1992	Red Lions
7	Micium **MHONE**	(26) 19.05.1995	Blue Eagles
8	Chimwemwe **IDANA**	(23) 07.09.1998	Big Bullets
10	Francisco **MADINGA**	(22) 11.02.2000	Dila Gori (Geo)
17	John **BANDA**	(28) 20.04.1993	UD Songo (Moz)
18	Zebron **KALIMA**	(19) 13.05.2002	Silver Strikers

FORWARDS

9	Richard **MBULU**	(28) 25.01.1994	Baroka (Saf)
11	Gabadinho **MHANGO**	(29) 27.09.1992	Orlando Pirates (Saf)
13	Peter **BANDA**	(21) 22.09.2000	Simba (Tan)
14	Robin **NGALANDE**	(29) 02.11.1992	St. George (Eth)
20	Yamikani **CHESTER**	(27) 20.12.1994	Mighty Wanderers
22	Khuda **MUYABA**	(28) 26.12.1993	Polokwane City (Saf)
26	Stain **DAVIE**	(24) 23.09.1997	Silver Strikers
27	Gerald **PHIRI JR.**	(28) 08.06.1993	Al Hilal Omdurman (Sdn)

COACH

Mario **MARINICA** (Rou)	(57) 13.12.1964	

Ivory Coast...Nicolas Pepe (L) shone for *Les Elephants*

Spot on...Mali's top goalscorer Ibrahima Kone (R) celebrates

Trickster...Morocco's Sofiane Boufal (R) was a handful

MALI

GOALKEEPERS

1	Ibrahim **MOUNKORO**	(31) 23.02.1990	TP Mazembe (Saf)
16	Djigui **DIARRA**	(26) 27.02.1995	Young Africans (Tan)
22	Ismael **DIAWARA**	(27) 11.11.1994	Malmo (Swe)

DEFENDERS

2	Hamari **TRAORE**	(30) 27.01.1992	Rennes (Fra)
3	Charles **TRAORE**	(30) 01.01.1992	Nantes (Fra)
5	Boubacar **KOUYATE**	(24) 15.04.1997	Metz (Fra)
6	Massadio **HAIDARA**	(29) 02.12.1992	Lens (Fra)
12	Moussa **SISSAKO**	(21) 10.11.2000	Standard Liege (Bel)
13	Senou **COULIBALY**	(27) 04.09.1994	Dijon (Fra)
15	Mamadou **FOFANA**	(24) 21.01.1998	Amiens (Fra)
17	Falaye **SACKO**	(26) 01.05.1995	Vitoria Guimaraes (Por)
24	Issaka **SAMAKE**	(27) 20.10.1994	Horoya (Gui)

MIDFIELDERS

4	Amadou **HAIDARA**	(24) 31.01.1998	RB Leipzig (Ger)
7	Moussa **DOUMBIA**	(27) 15.08.1994	Reims (Fra)
8	Diadie **SAMASSEKOU**	(26) 11.01.1996	Hoffenheim (Ger)
11	Lassana **COULIBALY**	(25) 10.04.1996	Salernitana (Ita)
20	Yves **BISSOUMA**	(25) 30.08.1996	Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng)
21	Adama Noss **TRAORE**	(26) 28.06.1995	Hatayspor (Tur)
23	Aliou **DIENG**	(24) 16.10.1997	Al Ahly (Egy)
26	Mohamed **CAMARA**	(22) 06.01.2000	RB Salzburg (Aut)
27	Rominigue **KOUAME**	(25) 17.12.1996	Troyes (Fra)
28	Hamidou **TRAORE**	(25) 07.10.1996	Giresunspor (Tur)

FORWARDS

9	El Bilal **TOURE**	(20) 03.10.2001	Reims (Fra)
10	Kalifa **COULIBALY**	(30) 21.08.1991	Nantes (Fra)
14	Adama Malouda **TRAORE**	(26) 05.06.1995	Sheriff Tiraspol (Mda)
18	Ibrahima **KONE**	(22) 16.06.1999	Sarpsborg (Nor)
19	Moussa **DJENEPO**	(23) 15.06.1998	Southampton (Eng)
25	Lassine **SINAYOKO**	(22) 08.12.1999	Auxerre (Fra)

COACH

Mohamed **MAGASSOUBA**	(64) 12.02.1958	

MAURITANIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Mbacke **N'DIAYE**	(27) 19.12.1994	Nouakchott Kings
16	Mohamed **EL MOKHTAR**	(19) 10.10.2002	Douans
22	Babacar **DIOP**	(26) 17.09.1995	Nouadhibou

DEFENDERS

2	Souleymane **KARAMOKO**	(29) 29.07.1992	Nancy (Fra)
3	Aly **ABEID**	(24) 11.12.1997	Valenciennes (Fra)
4	Harouna Abou **DEMBA**	(30) 31.12.1991	Unattached
5	Abdoul **BA**	(28) 08.02.1994	Al-Ahli Tripoli (Lby)
13	Diadie **DIARRA**	(29) 23.01.1993	GOAL FC (Fra)
15	Souleymane **DOUKARA**	(30) 29.09.1991	Giresunspor (Tur)
20	Houssen **ABDERRAHMANE**	(27) 03.02.1995	Francs Borains (Bel)
21	El Hassan **HOUEIBIB**	(28) 31.10.1993	Al Zawraa (Irq)

MIDFIELDERS

6	Khassa **CAMARA**	(29) 22.10.1992	NorthEast United (Ind)
8	Guessouma **FOFANA**	(29) 17.12.1992	CFR Cluj (Rou)
12	Almike **N'DIAYE**	(25) 26.10.1996	GOAL FC (Fra)
14	Mohamed Dellah **YALY**	(24) 01.11.1997	Nouadhibou
17	Abdallahi **MAHMOUD**	(21) 04.05.2000	Istra 1961 (Cro)
18	Bodda **MOUHSINE**	(24) 18.07.1997	Nouadhibou
23	Mouhamed **SOUEID**	(30) 31.12.1991	Nouadhibou
24	Sidi **YACOUB** Ethmane	(26) 10.12.1995	AS Vita (Cod)
26	Beyatt **LEKWEIRY**	(16) 11.04.2005	Douanes
28	Abdoulkader **THIAM**	(23) 03.10.1998	Boulogne (Fra)

FORWARDS

7	Idrissa **THIAM**	(21) 02.09.2000	ASAC Concorde
9	Hemeya **TANJY**	(23) 01.05.1998	Nouadhibou
10	Adama **BA**	(28) 27.08.1993	RS Berkane (Mar)
11	Oumar **CAMARA**	(29) 19.08.1992	Beroe (Bul)
19	Ibrehima **COULIBALY**	(32) 30.07.1989	Le Mans (Fra)
25	Pape Ibnou **BA**	(29) 05.01.1993	Le Havre (Fra)
27	Aboubakar **KAMARA**	(26) 07.03.1995	Aris Saloniki (Gre)

COACH

Didier Gomes **DA ROSA** (Fra)	(52) 10.10.1969	

MOROCCO

GOALKEEPERS

1	**BONO**	(30) 05.04.1991	Sevilla (Spa)
12	**MUNIR** Mohamedi	(32) 10.05.1989	Hatayspor (Tur)
22	Ahmed **TAGNOUTI**	(25) 05.04.1996	Wydad

DEFENDERS

2	Achraf **HAKIMI**	(23) 04.11.1998	Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
3	Adam **MASINA**	(28) 02.01.1994	Watford (Eng)
5	Nayef **AGUERD**	(25) 30.03.1996	Rennes (Fra)
6	Romain **SAISS**	(31) 26.03.1990	Wolverhampton Wanderers (Eng)
18	Soufiane **CHAKLA**	(28) 02.09.1993	OH Leuven (Bel)
20	Sofiane **ALAKOUCH**	(23) 29.07.1998	Metz (Fra)
21	Souffian **EL KAROUANI**	(21) 19.10.2000	NEC Nijmegen (Ned)
24	Samy **MMAEE**	(25) 08.09.1996	Ferencvaros (Hun)
25	Mohamed **CHIBI**	(29) 21.01.1993	FAR

MIDFIELDERS

4	Sofyan **AMRABAT**	(25) 21.08.1996	Fiorentina (Ita)
7	Imran **LOUZA**	(22) 01.05.1999	Watford (Eng)
8	Azzedine **OUNAHI**	(21) 19.04.2000	Angers (Fra)
11	Faycal **FAJR**	(33) 01.08.1988	Sivasspor (Tur)
13	Ilias **CHAIR**	(24) 30.10.1997	Queens Park Rangers (Eng)
15	Selim **AMALLAH**	(25) 15.11.1996	Standard Liege (Bel)
16	Aymane **BARKOK**	(23) 21.05.1998	Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger)
17	Sofiane **BOUFAL**	(28) 17.09.1993	Angers (Fra)

FORWARDS

9	Ayoub **EL KAABI**	(28) 25.06.1993	Hatayspor (Tur)
10	**MUNIR** EL Haddadi	(26) 01.09.1995	Sevilla (Spa)
14	Zakaria **ABOUKHLAL**	(22) 18.02.2000	AZ (Ned)
19	Youssef **EN-NESYRI**	(24) 01.06.1997	Sevilla (Spa)
23	Ryan **MMAEE**	(24) 01.11.1997	Ferencvaros (Hun)
26	Achraf **BENCHARKI**	(27) 24.09.1994	Zamalek (Egy)
27	Soufiane **RAHIMI**	(25) 02.06.1996	Al Ain (UAE)
28	Tarik **TISSOUDALI**	(28) 02.04.1993	Gent (Bel)

COACH

Vahid **HALILHODZIC** (Bih)	(69) 15.05.1952	

NIGERIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Maduka **OKOYE**	(22) 28.08.1999	Sparta Rotterdam (Ned)
16	Daniel **AKPEYI**	(35) 03.08.1986	Kaizer Chiefs (Saf)
23	Francis **UZOHO**	(23) 28.10.1998	Omonia Nicosia (Cyp)
27	John **NOBLE**	(28) 06.06.1993	Enyimba Aba

DEFENDERS

2	Ola **AINA**	(25) 08.10.1996	Torino (Ita)
3	Jamilu **COLLINS**	(27) 05.08.1994	Paderborn (Ger)
5	William **TROOST-EKONG**	(28) 01.09.1993	Watford (Eng)
6	Semi **AJAYI**	(28) 09.11.1993	West Bromwich Albion (Eng)
12	Zaidu **SANUSI**	(24) 13.06.1997	Porto (Por)
20	Chidozie **AWAZIEM**	(25) 01.01.1997	Alanyaspor (Tur)
21	Tyronne **EBUEHI**	(26) 16.12.1995	Venezia (Ita)
22	Kenneth **OMERUO**	(28) 17.10.1993	Leganes (Spa)
26	Olisa **NDAH**	(24) 21.01.1998	Orlando Pirates (Saf)

MIDFIELDERS

4	Wilfred **NDIDI**	(25) 16.12.1996	Leicester City (Eng)
8	Frank **ONYEKA**	(24) 01.01.1998	Brentford (Eng)
10	Joe **ARIBO**	(25) 21.07.1996	Rangers (Sco)
18	Alex **IWOBI**	(25) 03.05.1996	Everton (Eng)
25	Kelechi **NWAKALI**	(23) 05.06.1998	Huesca (Spa)

FORWARDS

7	Ahmed **MUSA**	(29) 14.10.1992	Fatih Karagumruk (Tur)
11	Henry **ONYEKURU**	(24) 05.06.1997	Olympiakos (Gre)
13	Chidera **EJUKE**	(24) 02.01.1998	CSKA Moscow (Rus)
14	Kelechi **IHEANACHO**	(25) 03.10.1996	Leicester City (Eng)
15	Moses **SIMON**	(26) 12.07.1995	Nantes (Fra)
17	Samuel **CHUKWUEZE**	(22) 22.05.1999	Villarreal (Spa)
19	Taiwo **AWONIYI**	(24) 12.08.1997	Union Berlin (Ger)
24	Umar **SADIQ**	(25) 02.02.1997	Almeria (Spa)
28	Peter **OLAYINKA**	(26) 16.11.1995	Slavia Prague (Cze)

COACH

Augustine **EGUAVOEN**	(56) 19.08.1965	

Moses Simon...one of Nigeria's stand-out performers

SENEGAL

GOALKEEPERS

1	Seny **DIENG**	(27) 23.11.1994	Queens Park Rangers (Eng)
16	Edouard **MENDY**	(29) 01.03.1992	Chelsea (Eng)
23	Alfred **GOMIS**	(28) 05.09.1993	Rennes (Fra)
28	Alioune **FATY**	(22) 03.05.1999	Casa Sport

DEFENDERS

2	Saliou **CISS**	(32) 15.09.1989	Nancy (Fra)
3	Kalidou **KOULIBALY**	(30) 20.06.1991	Napoli (Ita)
4	Pape **CISSE**	(26) 14.09.1995	Olympiakos (Gre)
12	Fode **BALLO-TOURE**	(25) 03.01.1997	Milan (Ita)
14	Abdoulaye **SECK**	(29) 04.06.1992	Royal Antwerp (Bel)
20	Bouna **SARR**	(30) 31.01.1992	Bayern Munich (Ger)
21	Ibrahima **MBAYE**	(27) 19.11.1994	Bologna (Ita)
22	Abdou **DIALLO**	(25) 04.05.1996	Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)

MIDFIELDERS

5	Idrissa Gana **GUEYE**	(32) 26.09.1989	Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
6	Nampalys **MENDY**	(29) 23.06.1992	Leicester City (Eng)
8	Cheikhou **KOUYATE**	(32) 21.12.1989	Crystal Palace (Eng)
13	Joseph **LOPY**	(29) 15.03.1992	Sochaux (Fra)
17	Pape Matar **SARR**	(19) 14.09.2002	Metz (Fra)
24	Moustapha **NAME**	(26) 05.05.1995	Paris FC (Fra)
25	Mamadou **LOUM**	(25) 30.12.1996	Alaves (Spa)
26	Pape **GUEYE**	(23) 24.01.1999	Marseille (Fra)

FORWARDS

7	Keita **BALDE**	(26) 08.03.1995	Cagliari (Ita)
9	Boulaye **DIA**	(25) 16.11.1996	Villarreal (Spa)
10	Sadio **MANE**	(29) 10.04.1992	Liverpool (Eng)
11	Habib **DIALLO**	(26) 18.06.1995	Strasbourg (Fra)
15	Bamba **DIENG**	(21) 23.03.2000	Marseille (Fra)
18	Ismaila **SARR**	(23) 25.02.1998	Watford (Eng)
19	Famara **DIEDHIOU**	(29) 15.12.1992	Alanyaspor (Tur)
27	Mame **THIAM**	(29) 09.10.1992	Kayserispor (Tur)

COACH

Aliou **CISSE**	(45) 24.03.1976	

Senegal star...Sadio Mane shoots at goal versus Zimbabwe

SIERRA LEONE

GOALKEEPERS

1	Mohammed **KAMARA**	(22) 29.04.1999	East End Lions
16	Ibrahim **SESAY**	(17) 18.10.2004	East End Lions
23	Isaac **CAULKER**	(31) 25.01.1991	Kallon

DEFENDERS

2	Osman **KAKAY**	(24) 25.08.1997	Queens Park Rangers (Eng)
3	Kevin **WRIGHT**	(26) 28.12.1995	Orebro (Swe)
5	Steven **CAULKER**	(30) 29.12.1991	Gaziantep (Tur)
15	Yeami **DUNIA**	(25) 16.12.1996	East End Lions
17	Umaru **BANGURA**	(34) 07.10.1987	Neuchatel Xamax (Sui)
18	David **SESAY**	(23) 18.09.1998	Wealdstone (Eng)
20	Saidu **MANSARAY**	(20) 21.02.2001	Bo Rangers
25	Daniel **FRANCIS**	(19) 10.07.2002	Rot Weiss Ahlen (Ger)

MIDFIELDERS

4	**MEDO**	(34) 16.11.1987	Unattached
6	John **KAMARA**	(33) 05.12.1988	Keshla (Aze)
7	Kwame **QUEE**	(25) 07.09.1996	Vikingur Reykjavik (Isl)
8	Saidu **FOFANAH**	(24) 14.09.1997	Kallon
11	Sullay **KAIKAI**	(26) 26.08.1995	Wycombe Wanderers (Eng)
22	Issa **KALLON**	(26) 03.01.1996	Cambuur (Ned)
24	Prince **BARRIE**	(24) 18.08.1997	Bo Rangers
26	Saidu Bah **KAMARA**	(19) 03.03.2002	Bo Rangers
27	Abu **DUMBUYA**	(23) 29.01.1999	East End Lions

FORWARDS

9	Augustine **WILLIAMS**	(24) 03.08.1997	Unattached
10	Kei **KAMARA**	(37) 01.09.1984	HIFK (Fin)
12	Alhaji **KAMARA**	(27) 16.04.1994	Randers (Den)
13	Augustus **KARGBO**	(22) 24.08.1999	Crotone (Ita)
14	Mohamed **BUYA**	(27) 10.01.1995	Henan Songshan Longmen (Chn)
19	Mustapha **BUNDU**	(24) 28.02.1997	Aarhus (Den)
21	Idris **KANU**	(22) 05.12.1999	Peterborough United (Eng)
28	Musa **KAMARA**	(21) 06.08.2000	Bo Rangers

COACH

John **KEISTER**	(51) 11.11.1970	

Inspirational captain...Tunisia playmaker Wahbi Khazri

SUDAN

GOALKEEPERS

1	Ali **ABU-ESHREIN**	(32) 06.12.1989	Al Hilal Omdurman
16	Ishag **ADAM**	(23) 01.01.1999	Al Hilal Omdurman
23	Mohamed **MUSTAFA**	(25) 19.02.1996	Al Merrikh

DEFENDERS

2	Muhamed Kesra **HAKEEM**	(25) 25.10.1996	Hay Al Arab
3	Elsadig **HASSAN**	(25) 04.09.1996	Al Shorta Al Qadarif
4	Amjad **ISMAEIL**	(29) 01.01.1993	Al Ahly Shendi
5	Salah **NIMER**	(30) 05.02.1992	Al Merrikh
6	Mustafa **KARSHOM**	(29) 06.12.1992	Al Merrikh
7	Mohamed **AMIN**	(23) 06.11.1998	Motala (Swe)
12	Mustafa **ELFADNI**	(22) 24.10.1999	Al Ahly Shendi
13	Awad **ZAID**	(29) 01.01.1993	Ahli Al Khartoum
17	Mazin **MOHAMEDEIN**	(21) 02.05.2000	Tuti
28	Moaiad **ABDEEN**	(25) 21.05.1996	Al Hilal Omdurman

MIDFIELDERS

8	Muhamed **HASOUN**	(23) 18.09.1998	Al Merrikh
9	Abdelrazig **OMER**	(28) 18.07.1993	Al Hilal Omdurman
11	Gumaa **ABBAS**	(27) 03.11.1994	Al Hilal Omdurman
14	Mohamed **ALRASHED**	(28) 01.01.1994	Al Merrikh
18	Sharif **OMER**	(29) 19.06.1992	Al Hilal Al Fasher
19	Dhiya **MAHJOUB**	(26) 30.05.1995	Al Merrikh
20	Suliman **ZAKARIA**	(27) 01.01.1995	Hay Al Arab
21	Walieldin **KHIDIR**	(26) 16.09.1995	Al Hilal Omdurman
24	Captain **BASHIR**	(27) 01.06.1994	Alamal Atbara
26	Alsheikh **MUHAMED**	(24) 14.06.1997	Khartoum
27	Muhamed **ALMUNZER**	(21) 13.10.2000	El Hilal El Obeid

FORWARDS

10	Muhamed **ABDELRAHMAN**	(28) 10.07.1993	Al Hilal Omdurman
15	Yasin **HAMED**	(22) 12.09.1999	Nyiregyhaza Spartacus (Hun)
22	Al-Jezoli **NOUH**	(19) 24.10.2002	Al Merrikh
25	Musab **EISA**	(28) 10.12.1993	El Hilal El Obeid

COACH

Burhan **TIA**	(57) 01.01.1965	

TUNISIA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Farouk **BEN MUSTAPHA**	(32) 01.07.1989	Esperance
16	Aymen **DAHMEN**	(25) 28.01.1997	CS Sfaxien
22	Bechir **BEN SAID**	(27) 29.11.1994	US Monastir
26	Ali **JEMAL**	(31) 09.06.1990	Etoile du Sahel

DEFENDERS

2	Bilel **IFA**	(31) 09.03.1990	Club Africain
3	Montassar **TALBI**	(23) 26.05.1998	Rubin Kazan (Rus)
4	Omar **REKIK**	(20) 20.12.2001	Arsenal (Eng)
5	Oussema **HADDADI**	(30) 28.01.1992	Yeni Malatyaspor (Tur)
6	Dylan **BRONN**	(26) 19.06.1995	Metz (Fra)
12	Ali **MAALOUL**	(32) 01.01.1990	Al Ahly (Egy)
13	Ali **ABDI**	(28) 20.12.1993	Caen (Fra)
21	Hamza **MATHLOUTHI**	(29) 25.07.1992	Zamalek (Egy)
24	Mohamed Amine **BEN HAMIDA**	(26) 15.12.1995	Esperance

MIDFIELDERS

7	Youssef **MSAKNI**	(31) 28.10.1990	Al Arabi (Qat)
8	Saif-Eddine **KHAOUI**	(26) 27.04.1995	Clermont (Fra)
10	Wahbi **KHAZRI**	(31) 08.02.1991	Saint-Etienne (Fra)
14	Hannibal **MEJBRI**	(19) 21.01.2003	Manchester United (Eng)
15	Mohamed Ali **BEN ROMDHANE**	(22) 06.09.1999	Esperance
17	Ellyes **SKHIRI**	(26) 10.05.1995	Cologne (Ger)
18	Ghaylene **CHAALALI**	(27) 28.02.1994	Esperance
19	Hamza **RAFIA**	(22) 02.04.1999	Standard Liege (Bel)
20	Mohamed **DRAGER**	(25) 25.06.1996	Nottingham Forest (Eng)
25	Anis **BEN SLIMANE**	(20) 16.03.2001	Brondby (Den)
28	Aissa **LAIDOUNI**	(25) 13.12.1996	Ferencvaros (Hun)

FORWARDS

9	Yoann **TOUZGHAR**	(35) 28.11.1986	Troyes (Fra)
11	Seifeddine **JAZIRI**	(30) 12.02.1992	Zamalek (Egy)
23	Naim **SLITI**	(29) 27.07.1992	Al Ettifaq (KSA)
27	Issam **JEBALI**	(30) 25.12.1991	OB (Den)

COACH

Mondher **KEBAIER**	(51) 02.04.1970	

ZIMBABWE

GOALKEEPERS

1	Petros **MHARI**	(34) 15.04.1987	Platinum
21	Talbert **SHUMBA**	(31) 12.05.1990	Free State Stars (Saf)
23	Martin **MAPISA**	(23) 25.05.1998	Zamora (Spa)

DEFENDERS

2	Godknows **MURWIRA**	(28) 04.07.1993	Platinum
3	Jordan **ZEMURA**	(22) 14.11.1999	Bournemouth (Eng)
5	Gerald **TAKWARA**	(27) 29.10.1994	Venda (Saf)
6	Alec **MUDIMU**	(26) 08.04.1995	Torpedo Kutaisi (Geo)
12	Bruce **KANGWA**	(33) 24.07.1988	Azam (Tan)
14	Onismor **BHASERA**	(35) 07.12.1986	SuperSport United (Saf)
15	Teenage **HADEBE**	(26) 17.09.1995	Houston Dynamo (USA)
20	Peter **MUDUHWA**	(28) 11.08.1993	Highlanders
22	Takudzwa **CHIMWEMWE**	(29) 26.10.1992	Nkana (Zam)

MIDFIELDERS

4	Kelvin **MADZONGWE**	(31) 01.05.1990	Platinum
7	Ishmael **WADI**	(29) 19.12.1992	JDR Stars (Saf)
8	Kundai **BENYU**	(24) 12.12.1997	Vestri (Isl)
11	Never **TIGERE**	(31) 16.12.1990	Azam (Tan)
13	Thabani **KAMUSOKO**	(33) 02.03.1988	ZESCO United (Zam)
16	Kudakwashe **MAHACHI**	(28) 29.09.1993	SuperSport United (Saf)
24	Temptation **CHIWUNGA**	(29) 10.03.1992	JDR Stars (Saf)
25	Bill **ANTONIO**	(19) 03.09.2002	Dynamos

FORWARDS

9	David **MOYO**	(27) 17.12.1994	Hamilton Academical (Sco)
10	Tino **KADEWERE**	(26) 05.01.1996	Lyon (Fra)
17	Knowledge **MUSONA**	(31) 21.06.1990	Al Tai (KSA)
18	Prince **DUBE**	(25) 17.02.1997	Azam (Tan)
19	Admiral **MUSKWE**	(23) 21.08.1998	Luton Town (Eng)
26	Panashe **MUTIMBANYOKA**	(19) 21.02.2002	Platinum

COACH

Norman **MAPEZA**	(49) 12.04.1972	

(ages correct as of 18.02.22)

Internationals

AFCON 2021

Group Stage

Group A

Jan 9 – Yaounde
Cameroon 2 (Aboubakar 40 pen, 45+3 pen)
Burkina Faso 1 (Sangare 24)

Jan 9 – Yaounde
Ethiopia 0
Cape Verde 1 (J. Tavares 45+1)

Jan 13 – Yaounde
Cameroon 4 (Toko Ekambi 8, 68, Aboubakar 53, 55)
Ethiopia 1 (Hotessa 4)

Jan 13 – Yaounde
Cape Verde 0
Burkina Faso 1 (Bande 39)

Jan 17 – Yaounde
Cape Verde 1 (Rodrigues 53)
Cameroon 1 (Aboubakar 39)

Jan 17 – Bafoussam
Burkina Faso 1 (Bayala 25)
Ethiopia 1 (Kebede 52 pen)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon (Q)	3	2	1	0	7	3	7
Burkina Faso (Q)	3	1	1	1	3	3	4
Cape Verde (Q)	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Ethiopia	3	0	1	2	2	6	1

Group B

Jan 10 – Bafoussam
Senegal 1 (Mane 90+7 pen)
Zimbabwe 0

Jan 10 – Bafoussam
Guinea 1 (Sylla 35)
Malawi 0

Jan 14 – Bafoussam
Senegal 0
Guinea 0

Jan 14 – Bafoussam
Malawi 2 (Mhango 43, 58)
Zimbabwe 1 (Wadi 38)

Jan 18 – Bafoussam
Malawi 0
Senegal 0

Jan 18 – Yaounde
Zimbabwe 2 (Musona 26, Mahachi 43)
Guinea 1 (N. Keita 49)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal (Q)	3	1	2	0	1	0	5
Guinea (Q)	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Malawi (Q)	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Zimbabwe	3	1	0	2	3	4	3

Group C

Jan 10 – Yaounde
Morocco 1 (Boufal 83)
Ghana 0

Jan 10 – Yaounde
Comoros 0
Gabon 1 (Boupendza 16)

Jan 14 – Yaounde
Morocco 2 (Amallah 16, Aboukhlal 88)
Comoros 0

Jan 14 – Yaounde
Gabon 1 (Allevinah 88)
Ghana 1 (A. Ayew 18)

Jan 18 – Yaounde
Gabon 2 (Allevinah 21, Aguerd 81 og)
Morocco 2 (Boufal 74 pen, Hakimi 84)

Jan 18 – Garoua
Ghana 2 (Boakye 64, Djiku 77)
Comoros 3 (Ben 4, Mogni 62, 85)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco (Q)	3	2	1	0	5	2	7
Gabon (Q)	3	1	2	0	4	3	5
Comoros (Q)	3	1	0	2	3	5	3
Ghana	3	0	1	2	3	5	1

Group D

Jan 11 – Garoua
Nigeria 1 (Iheanacho 30)
Egypt 0

Jan 11 – Garoua
Sudan 0
Guinea-Bissau 0

Jan 15 – Garoua
Nigeria 3 (Chukwueze 3, Awoniyi 45, Simon 46)
Sudan 1 (Khedr 70 pen)

Jan 15 – Garoua
Guinea-Bissau 0
Egypt 1 (Salah 69)

Jan 19 – Garoua
Guinea-Bissau 0
Nigeria 2 (Sadiq 56, Troost-Ekong 75)

Jan 19 – Yaounde
Egypt 1 (Abdelmonem 35)
Sudan 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nigeria (Q)	3	3	0	0	6	1	9
Egypt (Q)	3	2	0	1	2	1	6
Sudan	3	0	1	2	1	4	1
Guinea-Bissau	3	0	1	2	0	3	1

Group E

Jan 11 – Douala
Algeria 0
Sierra Leone 0

Jan 12 – Douala
Equatorial Guinea 0
Ivory Coast 1 (Gradel 5)

Jan 16 – Douala
Ivory Coast 2 (Haller 25, Pepe 65)
Sierra Leone 2 (Mu. Kamara 55, K. Kamara 90+3)

Jan 16 – Douala
Algeria 0
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Esteban 70)

Jan 20 – Douala
Ivory Coast 3 (Kessie 22, I. Sangare 39, Pepe 54)
Algeria 1 (Bendebka 73)

Jan 20 – Limbe
Sierra Leone 0
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Ganet 38)

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast (Q)	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Eq. Guinea (Q)	3	2	0	1	2	1	6
Sierra Leone	3	0	2	1	2	3	2
Algeria	3	0	1	2	1	4	1

Group F

Jan 12 – Limbe
Tunisia 0
Mali 1 (Kone 48 pen)

Jan 12 – Limbe
Mauritania 0
Gambia 1 (A. Jallow 10)

Jan 16 – Limbe
Gambia 1 (Mu. Barrow 90 pen)
Mali 1 (Kone 79 pen)

Jan 16 – Limbe
Tunisia 4 (Mathlouthi 4, Khazri 9, 64, Jaziri 66)
Mauritania 0

Jan 20 – Limbe
Gambia 1 (A. Jallow 90+3)
Tunisia 0

Jan 20 – Douala
Mali 2 (M. Haidara 2, Kone 49 pen)
Mauritania 0

Final standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mali (Q)	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Gambia (Q)	3	2	1	0	3	1	7
Tunisia (Q)	3	1	0	2	4	2	3
Mauritania	3	0	0	3	0	7	0

Round of 16

Jan 23 – Limbe
Burkina Faso 1 (Traore 28)
Gabon 1 (Guira 90+1 og)
AET. Burkina Faso win 7-6 on penalties

Jan 23 – Garoua
Nigeria 0
Tunisia 1 (Msakni 47)

Jan 24 – Bafoussam
Guinea 0
Gambia 1 (Mu. Barrow 71)

Jan 24 – Yaounde
Cameroon 2 (Toko Ekambi 29, Aboubakar 70)
Comoros 1 (Y. M'Changama 81)

Jan 25 – Bafoussam
Senegal 2 (Mane 60, B. Dieng 90+2)
Cape Verde 0

Jan 25 – Yaounde
Morocco 2 (En-Nesyri 45+2, Hakimi 70)
Malawi 1 (Mhango 7)

Jan 26 – Douala
Ivory Coast 0
Egypt 0
AET. Egypt win 5-4 on penalties

Jan 26 – Limbe
Mali 0
Equatorial Guinea 0
AET. Equatorial Guinea win 6-5 on penalties

Quarter-Finals

Jan 29 – Douala
Gambia 0
Cameroon 2 (Toko Ekambi 50, 57)

Jan 29 – Garoua
Burkina Faso 1 (Da. Ouattara 45+3)
Tunisia 0

Jan 30 – Yaounde
Egypt 2 (Salah 53, Trezeguet 100)
Morocco 1 (Boufal 7 pen)
After Extra-Time

Jan 30 – Yaounde
Senegal 3 (Diedhiou 28, Kouyate 68, I. Sarr 79)
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Buyla 57)

Semi-Finals

Feb 2 – Yaounde
Burkina Faso 1 (Toure 82)
Senegal 3 (A. Diallo 70, I. Gueye 76, Mane 87)

Feb 3 – Yaounde
Cameroon 0
Egypt 0
AET. Egypt win 3-1 on penalties

Third-Place Play-Off

Feb 5 – Yaounde
Burkina Faso 3 (Yago 24, A. Onana 43 og, Dj. Ouattara 49)
Cameroon 3 (Bahoken 71, Aboubakar 85, 87)
AET. Cameroon win 5-3 on penalties

Final

Feb 6 – Yaounde
Senegal 0
Egypt 0
AET. Senegal win 4-2 on penalties

2022 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

EUROPE Section

● *13 finals places available (3 via the play-offs)*

Second Round Draw

Path A

Mar 24: Scotland v Ukraine, Wales v Austria
Mar 29: Final

Path B

Mar 24: Russia v Poland, Sweden v Czech Rep
Mar 29: Final

Path C

Mar 24: Italy v North Macedonia, Portugal v Turkey
Mar 29: Final

AFRICA section

● *5 finals places available*

Third Round Draw

First leg

Mar 24: Cameroon v Algeria, DR Congo v Morocco, Egypt v Senegal, Ghana v Nigeria, Mali v Tunisia

Second leg

Mar 29: Algeria v Cameroon, Morocco v DR Congo, Nigeria v Ghana, Senegal v Egypt, Tunisia v Mali

ASIA Section

● *4.5 finals places available*

Third Round

Group A

Jan 27 – Tehran
Iran 1 (Taremi 48)
Iraq 0

Jan 27 – Sidon
Lebanon 0
South Korea 1 (Cho Gue-sung 45+1)

Jan 27 – Dubai
United Arab Emirates 2 (Caio 43 Al Ghassani 70)
Syria 0

Feb 1 – Tehran
Iran 1 (Taremi 44)
United Arab Emirates 0

Feb 1 – Dubai
Syria 0
S. Korea 2 (Kim Jin-su 53, Kwon Chang-hoon 71)

Feb 1 – Sidon
Lebanon 1 (Sabra 45+2)
Iraq 1 (Hussein 39)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran (Q)	8	7	1	0	13	2	22
South Korea (Q)	8	6	2	0	11	2	20
UAE	8	2	3	3	6	6	9
Lebanon	8	1	3	4	5	8	6
Iraq	8	0	5	3	4	11	5
Syria	8	0	2	6	5	15	2

Group B

Jan 27 – Saitama
Japan 2 (Osako 13 pen, Ito 61)
China 0

Jan 27 – Melbourne
Australia 4 (Maclaren 30, Rogic 45+2, Goodwin 72, McGree 76)
Vietnam 0

Jan 27 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Buraikan 48)
Oman 0

Feb 1 – Saitama
Japan 2 (Minamino 32, Ito 50)
Saudi Arabia 0

Feb 1 – Muscat
Oman 2 (Fawaz 54, 89 pen)
Australia 2 (Maclaren 15 pen, Mooy 79)

Feb 1 – Hanoi
Vietnam 3 (Ho Tan Tai 9, Nguyen Tien Linh 16, Phan Van Duc 76)
China 1 (Xu Xin 90+7)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saudi Arabia	8	6	1	1	10	5	19
Japan	8	6	0	2	9	3	18
Australia	8	4	3	1	15	6	15
Oman	8	2	2	4	8	10	8
China	8	1	2	5	8	16	5
Vietnam	8	1	0	7	7	17	3

CONCACAF Section

● *3.5 finals places available*

Third Round

Jan 27 – Kingston
Jamaica 1 (Johnson 50)
Mexico 2 (Martin 81, Vega 83)

Jan 27 – Columbus
United States 1 (A. Robinson 52)
El Salvador 0

Jan 27 – San Pedro Sula
Honduras 0
Canada 2 (Maldonado 10 og, David 73)

Jan 27 – San Jose
Costa Rica 1 (Ruiz 65)
Panama 0

Jan 30 – Hamilton
Canada 2 (Larin 7, Adekugbe 90+5)
United States 0

Jan 30 – Mexico City
Mexico 0
Costa Rica 0

Jan 30 – Panama City
Panama 3 (Brown 43 og, Davis 51, Ariano 69)
Jamaica 2 (Antonio 5 pen, Gray 87)

Jan 30 – San Pedro Sula
Honduras 0
El Salvador 2 (Bonilla 35, Ceren 90+2)

Feb 2 – Kingston
Jamaica 0
Costa Rica 1 (Campbell 62)

Feb 2 – Saint Paul
USA 3 (McKennie 8, Zimmerman 37, Pulisic 67)
Honduras 0

Feb 2 – Mexico City
Mexico 1 (Jimenez 80 pen)
Panama 0

Feb 2 – San Salvador
El Salvador 0
Canada 2 (Hutchinson 66, David 90+3 pen)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Canada	11	7	4	0	19	5	25
United States	11	6	3	2	16	7	21
Mexico	11	6	3	2	14	8	21
Panama	11	5	2	4	14	13	17
Costa Rica	11	4	4	3	8	7	16
El Salvador	11	2	3	6	6	13	9
Jamaica	11	1	4	6	9	16	7
Honduras	11	0	3	8	5	22	3

SOUTH AMERICA Section

● *4.5 finals places available*

Jan 27 – Quito
Ecuador 1 (Torres 75)
Brazil 1 (Casemiro 6)

Jan 27 – Asuncion
Paraguay 0
Uruguay 1 (L. Suarez 50)

Jan 27 – Calama
Chile 1 (Brereton Diaz 21)
Argentina 2 (Di Maria 10, La. Martinez 34)

Jan 28 – Barranquilla
Colombia 0
Peru 1 (Flores 85)

Jan 28 – Barinas
Venezuela 4 (Rondon 24, 34, 67, Machis 55)
Bolivia 1 (Miranda 38)

Feb 1 – La Paz
Bolivia 2 (Enoumba 37, Martins 88)
Chile 3 (Sanchez 14, 86, Nunez 77)

Feb 1 – Montevideo
Uruguay 4 (Bentancur 1, De Arrascaeta 23, Cavani 45+1, Suarez 53 pen)
Venezuela 1 (Josef Martinez 65)

Feb 1 – Cordoba
Argentina 1 (La. Martinez 29)
Colombia 0

Feb 1 – Belo Horizonte
Brazil 4 (Raphinha 28, Coutinho 62, Antony 86, Rodrygo 88)
Paraguay 0

Feb 1 – Lima
Peru 1 (Flores 69)
Ecuador 1 (Estrada 2)

Current standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Brazil (Q)	15	12	3	0	32	5	39
Argentina (Q)	15	10	5	0	23	7	35
Ecuador	16	7	4	5	25	15	25
Uruguay	16	6	4	6	19	22	22
Peru	16	6	3	7	17	21	21
Chile	16	5	4	7	19	20	19
Colombia	16	3	8	5	16	19	17
Bolivia	16	4	3	9	23	35	15
Paraguay	16	2	7	7	9	23	13
Venezuela	16	3	1	12	14	30	10

Club Football

AFRICA

2021-22 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group Stage Draw

Group A
Al Ahly, Mamelodi Sundowns, Al Hilal, Al Merrikh

Group B
Raja Casablanca, Horoya, ES Setif, AmaZulu

Group C
Esperance, Etoile du Sahel, CR Belouizdad, Jwaneng Galaxy

Group D
Wydad Casablanca, Zamalek, Petro de Luanda, Sagrada Esperanca

ASIA

CHINA

2021 Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shandong Taishan (C)	22	15	6	1	47	16	51
Shanghai Port	22	13	6	3	42	14	45
Guangzhou FC	22	13	5	4	47	17	44
Changchun Yatai	22	11	6	5	31	20	39
Beijing Guoan	22	9	6	7	26	28	33
Shenzhen	22	9	5	8	33	29	32
Guangzhou City	22	7	8	7	32	31	29
Hebei	22	6	7	9	15	28	25

2021 Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Shanghai Shenhua	22	10	7	5	34	22	37
Henan Songshan Longman	22	7	9	6	19	20	30
Cangzhou Mighty Lions	22	6	6	10	25	32	24
Tianjin Tigers	22	5	6	11	18	35	21
Chongqing Liangjiang Athletic	22	5	5	12	21	36	20
Wuhan FC	22	3	11	8	23	30	20
Dalian Pro (R)*	22	6	1	15	21	37	19
Qingdao FC (R)*	22	3	2	17	13	52	11

**Relegated after losing in relegation play-offs*

CONCACAF

CANADA

2021 Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Forge*	28	16	2	10	39	24	50
Cavalry*	28	14	8	6	34	30	50
Pacific (C)*	28	13	6	9	47	34	45
York United*	28	8	12	8	35	39	36
Valour	28	10	5	13	38	36	35
HFX Wanderers	28	8	11	9	28	34	35
Edmonton	28	6	10	12	34	41	28
Atletico Ottawa	28	6	8	14	30	47	26

**Pacific won play-offs involving top four teams*

COSTA RICA

2021-22 Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Herediano (C)*	22	14	3	5	35	17	45
Alajuelense*	22	12	5	5	42	24	41
Santos de Guapiles*	22	10	6	6	45	34	36
Deportivo Saprissa*	22	9	7	6	40	22	34
Cartagines	22	10	4	8	30	28	34
Municipal Grecia	22	8	5	9	29	26	29
Sporting San Jose	22	7	6	9	30	37	27
San Carlos	22	5	9	8	28	34	24
Perez Zeledon	22	6	6	10	21	29	24
Guanacasteca	22	6	6	10	21	35	24
Guadalupe	22	4	9	9	18	34	21
Jicaral	22	4	8	10	19	38	20

**Herediano won play-offs involving top four teams*

CURACAO

2020-21 Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jong Holland (C)*	18	11	6	1	35	11	39
Scherpenheuvel*	18	11	4	3	27	10	37
Victory Boys*	18	10	5	3	36	28	35
Inter Willemstad*	18	10	4	4	46	21	34
SITHOC*	18	7	5	6	30	29	26
SUBT*	18	6	4	8	22	25	22
Centro Barber	18	6	2	10	19	32	20
Centro Dominguito	18	5	4	9	25	36	19
UNDEBA	18	4	2	12	20	35	14
VESTA (R)	18	0	4	14	12	45	4

**Jong Holland won play-offs involving top six teams*

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

2021 Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vega Real*	10	5	3	2	12	12	18
Cibao (C)*	10	5	2	3	12	6	17
Atletico Pantoja*	10	4	4	2	14	9	16
Jarabacoa*	10	4	3	3	14	13	15
Moca	10	2	3	5	6	9	9
Universidad O&M	10	2	1	7	10	19	7

**Cibao won play-offs involving top four teams*

EL SALVADOR

2021-22 Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Alianza (C)*	22	16	3	3	48	19	51
FAS*	22	11	5	6	33	20	38
Firpo*	22	9	8	5	36	28	35
Once Deportivo*	22	9	8	5	39	32	35
Aguila*	22	9	7	6	36	27	34
Platense*	22	7	8	7	22	27	29
Chalatenango*	22	7	6	9	31	31	27
Jocoro*	22	5	11	6	31	33	26
Atletico Marte	22	6	7	9	22	30	25
Santa Tecla	22	6	6	10	23	33	24
Isidro Metapan	22	3	7	12	16	35	16
Municipal Limeno	22	2	8	12	16	38	14

**Alianza won play-offs involving top eight teams*

GUATEMALA

2021-22 Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Antigua GFC*	22	14	4	4	36	13	46
Comunicaciones*	22	13	5	4	37	19	44
Municipal*	22	11	6	5	30	15	39
Malacateco (C)*	22	10	6	6	36	23	36
Santa Lucia*	22	8	12	2	28	25	36
Xelaju*	22	8	6	8	18	23	30
Iztapa*	22	8	4	10	30	36	28
Solola*	22	6	7	9	21	32	25
Guastatoya	22	5	8	9	18	23	23
Coban Imperial	22	5	5	12	22	31	20
Achuapa	22	3	7	12	12	24	16
Nueva Concepcion	22	4	4	14	12	36	16

**Malacateco won play-offs involving top eight teams*

HONDURAS

2021-22 Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Espana*	18	11	5	2	32	15	38
Vida*	18	10	6	2	30	17	36
Olimpia (C)*	18	10	5	3	35	14	35
Motagua*	18	10	5	3	37	20	35
UPNFM*	18	7	6	5	28	21	27
Marathon*	18	8	3	7	25	19	27
Real Sociedad	18	4	4	10	20	41	16
Honduras Progreso	18	4	3	11	19	31	15
Victoria	18	4	2	12	10	32	14
Platense	18	1	3	14	19	45	6

**Olimpia won play-offs involving top six teams*

NICARAGUA

2021-22 Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Real Esteli*	18	12	2	4	41	21	38
Diriangen (C)*	18	12	2	4	38	20	38
Managua*	18	9	4	5	31	15	31
Walter Ferretti*	18	8	4	6	40	28	28
Deportivo Ocotal*	18	6	5	7	19	28	23
Juventus Managua*	18	6	4	8	21	27	22
Real Madriz	18	6	3	9	24	32	21
H&H Export	18	4	6	8	26	33	18
UNAN Managua	18	4	5	9	23	38	17
Municipal Jalapa	18	3	5	10	12	33	14

**Diriangen won play-offs involving top six teams*

PANAMA

2021 Clausura East

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tauro (C)*	16	9	5	2	19	9	32
Plaza Amador*	16	6	7	3	19	10	25
Alianza*	16	7	4	5	13	12	25
Costa del Este	16	4	10	2	15	11	22
Arabe Unido	16	5	6	5	12	12	21
Sporting San Miguelito	16	3	6	7	10	17	15

2021 Clausura West

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Herrera*	16	5	9	2	20	16	24
Independiente*	16	6	6	4	19	16	24
Veraguas*	16	5	4	7	12	18	19
Universitario	16	5	2	9	15	20	17
Atletico Chiriqui	16	3	6	7	12	17	15
San Francisco	16	3	5	8	10	18	14

**Tauro won play-offs involving top three teams from each group*

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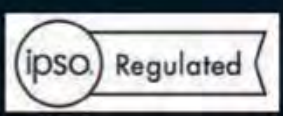

Yordan Letchkov

Bulgaria 2 Germany 1

1994 World Cup, USA

In the history of Bulgarian football, few games are as famous as their quarter-final victory over Germany at the 1994 World Cup. Bulgaria won 2-1, dethroning the reigning champions, with Hamburg attacker Yordan Letchkov scoring the most important goal of his football career to seal the win.

"This goal has a special place in my football life.

Before the match I was sure that we would win. We had a great generation, with players like Hristo Stoichkov, Emil Kostadinov, Krasimir Balakov, Nasko Sirakov and Borislav Mihaylov, and most of them played for big European clubs. We had the confidence to fight against the biggest teams in the world. Most of us were between 26 and 28 – the perfect age to demonstrate our experience.

During the World Cup we enjoyed the regime of coach Dimitar Penev. He was behind us, he made us feel free. We Balkans enjoy freedom by nature and this impressed us. But we were a team in which everybody knew what to do.

In the days before the game the Germans were surprised by our relaxed nature. Franz Beckenbauer even entered our base as a sports journalist to take a closer look at the Bulgarians! We had reached the quarter-finals for the first time, and people were paying closer attention to us.

I believed in our victory because I knew the Germans very well and I was sure that we could beat them. Even when we went 1-0 down, this faith didn't leave me and, when Stoichkov equalised, I was 100 per cent sure that my moment was coming.

Zlatko Yankov crossed to me, I outjumped Thomas Hassler and scored with my head. It wasn't planned; just pure improvisation and intuition in the right moment. As a forward I always looked for the ball, and when it came to me I knew how to turn it towards the net.

And that was the end of Germany as world champions! The Germans couldn't believe what happened, but in the next years they raised themselves again and just two years later they became European champions.

After the World Cup I returned to Germany, but the attitude towards me had obviously changed. Generally, the Germans are tolerant people and I didn't have any problems, but I felt a sense of uneasiness. How could a man, who is playing in the Bundesliga, throw Germany out of the tournament?

Now I think that maybe I should have left Hamburg and Germany straight after the World Cup, and signed with a club from a different country to change the atmosphere.

But now the people in Germany treat me with respect. It goes to show, to earn someone's respect, you have to beat them."

Interview by Rumen Paytashev

Iconic winner... Letchkov celebrates his winning goal

Diving header... Letchkov beats Hassler to the ball

"I outjumped Hassler and scored with my head. It wasn't planned; just pure improvisation and intuition"

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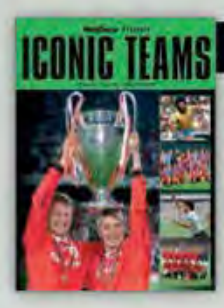

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